



(The Real) Stranger Things Season 3 by MidnightEverlark

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Summary: It's summer vacation, 1985. After everything that's happened in the past two years, Will just wants to go back to the way things were - and the Party seems to be racing on ahead, leaving him behind as they get swept up in the new adventure of being teenagers. But when something darker threatens to reenter their lives, the Party has more to deal with than just summer shenanigans.

1. Episode One: Suzie, Do You Copy?

A small, warmblooded body creeps out from the shadows, its eyes like little gleaming seeds in the dark. A wormlike tail trails through the dust behind it. Claws like minuscule thorns *click click click* on the brushed concrete of the cavernous space. It stands on its haunches, sniffs the air, cleans its whiskers with a twitch of paws. It is looking for food. It will not find any here - save, perhaps, for the stray insect that may have made its way this deep under the earth, away from the sun. This is a strange place - even for the rat.

Footsteps reverberate through the floor - a giant, to the rat, and its hairless tail whips into the shadows without a sound. The perpetrator: a figure in a white lab coat, tall, moving with purpose. Across the amphitheater, over the yellow-and-black lines painted on the floor that warn *CAUTION! DO NOT CROSS!* in blocky capital letters, straight into the heart of the goings-on. In the center of the amphitheater sits the Key, imposing on its concrete platform. Scientists swarm around the machine, every inch of skin hidden away under stark-white hazmat suits and hissing oxygen masks. They move about the mass of shining metal as though it was a bomb. Handling it delicately, almost nervously. The paint dried several days ago, but they still avoid touching the American flag that's been carefully stenciled onto one side. The man without a mask moves through the crowd calmly, putting out a hand to run his palm along the cool, glossy surface without fear. Fluorescent bulbs blaze in the dusty air, lending light but no heat, turning the hub of activity into a lurid swirl of white and silver.

It will work, this time.

He looks up, admiring the neatly organized spiderweb of cords and cables bolted along the walls and ceiling. They all converge here, at the center of the amphitheater. Yes. This time, it will work. Today's the day. Preparations are wrapping up; gears and pistons oiled; tick marks jotted into checkboxes; safety measures double and triple checked.

He pats the barrel of the metal monster, regards the scene with a single nod, and turns to depart. The crush of hazmat suits parts to

clear his path.

Dustin

Dustin's duffel bag *thwumps* onto the mattress, bouncing slightly.

Home sweet home.

He punches a button on his radio and flops down onto the edge of his bed, rubbing at his eyes as the local radio personality announces *Small Town Boy* by Age of Consent. He takes a big breath - in and out. It is eight hundred and nineteen miles from Camp Know Where to Hawkins, Indiana, and Dustin just spent the last two days travelling them in a small car with his mother. Which was fun at first. Impromptu sing-alongs with his mom have been a staple of driving to and from summer camp for years. They got Frosties in the drive through, they talked about camp, they played the alphabet game while they made their way across three states... Good times. He didn't even mind being stuck in a confined space with a parent for their mini-road-trip - much. That part wasn't so bad. It's just the last leg of the drive that got a little bit less than awesome. Mainly because it would seem that his friends have forgotten about him.

Eight hundred and nineteen miles, and the Party should have been in range of his supercomm for at least two or three of them.

You know, he always kind of forgets what his home town smells like until he's been gone for a while. It's like the way you don't realize what your own house smells like until you get back after vacation. Granted, it's no bed of roses. Hawkins tends to have a sort of... *aroma*. Like the farms on the outer edge, and like the forest that grows thick and green during the summer, and dusty, cracked asphalt in need of repairs, and humidity, and hay, and old brick buildings. It's not exactly a scent you'd find in a candle. But it's not *bad*, per se, and moreover: it's home.

"This is Gold..." he starts to say, but halfway through the hail, his voice stalls.

This new hat isn't quite molded to the shape of his head yet, like his

old one is, and he keeps reaching up to adjust it. Tugging it down over his forehead, then pushing it back. This time, when he reaches up, he snags his headset and tosses it onto the bed. What's the point?

He drove his mom up the wall during the last fifteen minutes of their journey, trying to get in contact with the Party.

"This is Gold Leader returning to base, do you copy? Over."

He must have said that at least two dozen times. He could feel his mom glancing at him as she drove, but he just ran his tongue over the rough string of braces on his lower teeth and leaned forward anxiously, as if tilting forward in his seat would help him see around the curve. The bobblehead cat on the dashboard headbanged along to the oldie on the radio as he tried again.

"I repeat. This is Gold Leader returning to base. Do you copy? Over."

Silence. Silence, and static, and the car radio bopping along to the beat. Come on. Come on. He jammed the talk button hard enough that the plastic edge dug into his thumb.

"This is goddamn Gold Leader -"

"Dusty!" his mom chided, and he slapped the supercomm into his lap.

"What?"

"Relax. For goodness sake."

"I'm in range, they should be answering."

"You've been away a whole month, honeybun, maybe they just..." She wiggled her shoulders with a tilt of her head. "Forgot."

She didn't mean him. Of course she didn't mean that they forgot *him*. She meant the radios; she meant they forgot what channel they're supposed to be on. Or that they forgot what day he was coming home. She didn't mean that they forgot about Dustin himself.

It's just, it's not exactly reassuring, you know? It's the middle of summer already. All the roads are lined with tall, dark weeds. In a

few days, everything will smell like sparkler smoke and kettle corn from the annual 4th of July fair. When he left it was barely June, and the weeds along the roadside were little more than sprouts. What else has happened since he left? What else has changed?

A muffled little *tink* draws his attention to the vivarium on his left, where Yurtle is bumping against the side, stumpy little legs flailing as he fails to comprehend glass. Dustin grins at him.

"At least someone's happy to see me."

Yurtle continues his mission to pass through the solid glass wall, unperturbed by his complete lack of success. Determined little guy. Never gets very far, but he tries.

Dustin isn't worried about it - the Party, that is. Honestly, he's not. It's not like they've all been acting weird for the past few months anyway. It's not like ever since El reappeared Mike has been MIA more often than not, visiting her at the cabin for as long as Hopper will allow. It's not like Max and Lucas have developed their own little language and routine together - not just boyfriend and girlfriend, but best friends. It's not like Will has been a slightly different person since... well, since everything. It's not like he misses how the Party used to be.

But Dustin doesn't like to mope. He slaps his thighs and stands up, reaching into the vivarium to turn Yurtle around. Yurtle lumbers off towards his pool, apparently assured that his ability to move is due to his own success, and Dustin hums along with the radio as he unzips his duffel bag with a flourish. Who is he to complain? He just got back from possibly the most amazing summer camp ever. He's got the whole rest of the summer ahead of him. He's got things to do. Places to go. Popsicles to eat. (You know what they *don't* have at Camp Know Where? Otter pops. Unbelievable, right? Three hundred acres, over five hundred campers and dozens of counselors, and not a single person could produce even one pack of sugary, brightly colored frozen goodness.)

He's got plans. Specifically, an invention to get up and running - and he has the perfect place in mind. He bets he can get the gang to help him set it up - if they'd just *answer*.

Okay, maybe he's a little unsettled. The Party doesn't just go radio silent on each other, okay? Because when a Party member goes radio-silent, it usually means that something is wrong. Really wrong.

His eyes slide over the stain in his carpet. It's a barely-perceptible rusty brown, now, blending in with the striped carpet unless you know just where to look. He had to tell his mom it was spaghetti sauce.

His toy robot starts marching out of the corner just as Dustin turns away, chattering unintelligibly in its perpetual-low-battery fizzle, red eyes glowing.

Wait.

What.

Dustin turns back, slowly, and this time the robot is joined by a toy tank and R2D2.

Now, he's no expert, but in Dustin's fourteen years of experience on earth, toys don't come alive. So he's understandably befuddled when he closes his eyes, counts to five, opens them again, and is met with a small crowd of miniature robots, vehicles, and one small mechanical dinosaur all moving with apparent purpose towards his bedroom door.

Okay. Cool. So either he's dreaming, or he has to burn the house down and salt the earth. He's seen *Poltergeist*. He knows how this ends.

Hopping carefully over a hotwheels car, Dustin grabs the first weapon he lays eyes on: a heavy, solid can of Farrah Fawcett hair spray from his dresser. R2D2 whistles cheerfully, as if beckoning - and, like the idiot that dies first in a horror movie, Dustin follows.

His hat slips down a little too far over his forehead, and he shoves it back as he creeps along in his socks. He has *got* to adjust the band on this thing.

"It's just a dream," he mutters to himself. The shiny plastic robot at the head of the small army bumps into a wall, adjusts its trajectory

with an affronted little grumble, and leads its followers across the hallway. Through the house. Into the living room. "You're dreaming."

The feeling of being watched makes his skin crawl. He swears, in about five seconds he's gonna punt one of the little -

They stopped.

Dustin freezes, eyes flicking over the now-inert toys. Then he darts forward to scoop up their leader, turning the robot over in his hands, inspecting it. An electrical disturbance, maybe...? He picks at the battery panel. That still wouldn't explain the -

Fweep!

The shrill blast pierces the air directly behind him and he screams, spins, and deploys his weapon - directly into the eyes of his best friend.

Lucas screams. Dustin screams. Lucas screams louder. Dustin realizes he's still spraying the hairspray and abruptly lets go, dropping the heavy can on Lucas's toe. Lucas screams again, hopping sideways, one hand over his eyes and one still clutching the *Welcome home Dustin!* sign that Dustin has just taken note of. Lucas then trips and hits the floor with a thump. The rest of the Party, who Dustin now sees behind him, gawks - and then explodes into guffaws.

Mike and El are holding hands, El hiding behind Mike's shoulder from the spray of Farrah Fawcett, laughing around the noisemaker in her mouth. Max's hair blazes down around her shoulders, the burnished-copper-red slightly frizzy with the humidity, her face screwed up in helpless bouts of belly laughter as she holds her stomach and watches her boyfriend roll around on the floor. Will's hair has grown out maybe half an inch since Dustin last saw him, the straight line of his bangs creeping towards his eyebrows and the fringe of his hair warped slightly where it gets caught on his ears. For a split second it gives Dustin a sinking feeling - like that's just one more thing that's changed since he left. But then Will laughs, that exact same chortling laugh he's had since they met in the fourth grade, and Dustin's face splits into a grin.

"Guys!" he yells, throwing out his arms, and they dogpile him.

From the floor, Lucas groans, "Welcome home, asshole."

"Ow, ow, ow, *ow*."

"Hold *still*."

"How am I supposed to hold still when you're waterboarding me?"

"Shut up, you're fine."

"Ow!"

Lucas and Max's voices filter through the house from the kitchen, where she's not-so-gently helping him rinse hair spray out of his eyes. The rest of the Party is still gathered around Dustin, hounding him with questions, chattering at him all at once about everything he missed while he was away.

It was Will and Max's idea, apparently. Mike organized it. Will made the sign. Lucas gathered the noisemakers. Max planned out the logistics of their arrival and hiding spot. El secured special permission from Hop to stray so far from the cabin. Oh, she's allowed out, now - he gave up trying to keep her in the cabin months ago. It's just, she's not really supposed to be in town where a lot of people might see her. But the Henderson house is pretty removed from the busy part of Hawkins, so it should be fine.

"Better?" they hear Max say.

"Still stings," Lucas pants, his voice muffled through the wall, and Dustin grimaces. He really does feel bad for chemical-bombing his best friend in the eyeballs. That is, until he hears Lucas say, "Is that a new zit?"

"What is wrong with you?" Max demands, followed promptly by the sound of the sink turning on again and Lucas howling, "I was just asking!"

"What's that?" El asks, completely ignoring the scene of violence that

they can all hear unfolding from across the house. Dustin can't tell if her hair is just a tad longer now, too, or if that's just his imagination. It touches her shoulders now, the curls stretched into waves by their own weight, and she brushes a strand away from her face as Dustin moves to scoop up the item she pointed at. The mass of popsicle sticks, perforated strips of metal, hot glue, screws, and odds and ends is about the size of a bread box.

"I call it -" He presents the device on one palm, turning the crank with the other hand until the rotor twirls with a papery clatter. "The Forever Clock!"

She *oohs* appreciatively.

El is a good science-buddy. She's whip-smart, despite her limited formal education, and forever curious. She's one of the few people who will sit through Dustin's impromptu scientific lectures for hours on end - in fact, she may be one of the only people he's met that actually seems to enjoy it. Maybe now that he's back they can start working on building that solar system model for her room like they talked about.

"All right? Yeah? Powered by wind. Very useful in the apocalypse."

He hands the device off to Will, who gives it a whirl for himself. Dustin digs into his pack again, pulling out another invention. "And then, I give you... The Slammer."

He's showcasing the little ones first. Because, well, the Forever Clock is pretty nifty, if he does say so himself - but he's saving the best for last. Just wait 'till they see.

Tak-tak-tak-tak goes the head of the hammer, pistoning back and forth on its freshly mechanized handle. El squishes her cheek into Mike's shoulder, drawing back with big eyes as Dustin brandishes it at them. She's unreasonably cute sometimes. Will peers at The Slammer with interest. Mike, meanwhile, is doing that annoying thing where he acts like he's too cool for whatever's going on. Right. Dustin kind of forgot about that. He didn't used to do that, and honestly, it's a load of bull. Nothing against Michael, but *cool* is not the adjective that Dustin would choose to describe his friend. Smart?

Yeah, definitely. Creative? Yes. Loyal and headstrong? Check and check. Kind, brave, and everything a Paladin should be? You betcha. There's a reason he's the President of the AV club. But, cool? It's a no on that one, chief.

Nevertheless, Mike lets a smile slip, and Dustin grins back.

"Pretty neat, huh?"

It's time. Time to unveil what he so carefully ferried all those eight hundred and nineteen miles home.

"But this."

He hefts the duffel bag off the bed. Wait 'till they see. Wait 'till they *hear*. He can't wait to see their faces.

"This is my masterpiece." They kneel on the carpet, following his example as he peels back the cover. "I would like you to meet Cerebro."

A switchboard. Wires. Knobs and dials. The shiny mesh of a microphone. Plastic and metal, oh-so-carefully stowed away in an organized chaos of pure potential. Dustin rubs his palms together brusquely, looking up to see his friends' reactions.

Mike is the first to speak. "What exactly are we looking at, here?"

"An unassembled, one-of-a-kind battery-powered radio tower."

They're still not getting it. Will starts poking at the contents of the bag, shifting a coil of blue and yellow wires to see the switchboard underneath. "So... it's a ham radio."

Dustin's eyes roll towards the ceiling. "The *Cadillac* of ham radios. This baby carries a crystal-clear connection over vast distances. I'm talking North Pole to South." There we go. Now they look properly impressed. Which means this is the moment. He sits back on his heels and drops the bomb. "I can talk to my girlfriend whenever and wherever I choose."

He was waiting to deliver the news specifically for this reaction - and

he isn't disappointed. El's eyes go huge. Her head snaps around to look at Mike, who's mirroring her expression. Mike looks at El. Will looks at Mike. El looks at Will. Then they all look back to him, at once, and at the same moment exclaim, "*Girlfriend?*"

Will

Will likes the summer.

Winter used to be his favorite season. The holidays, the cozy sweaters, the food, snowball fights, fireplaces, making presents for people. As the carols say, Christmas was the best time of the year. But now the first signs of cold weather always make his hackles rise, and the snow just looks like spores.

The mid-summer heat is reassuring. And stifling. Especially with this unwieldy bag full of antennas, umbrella handles, and PVC pipes weighing him down. Everyone's arms are full - except for Mike and El, who are too busy being a perfect, adorable, useless couple. Will's bangs stick to his forehead as he climbs, the nape of his neck wet with cooling sweat and -

Will slows. Grasses brush around his ankles, a fat ladybug crawling over one of his tennis shoes. For a second there -

He turns, facing down the hill. Weathertop is carpeted with clover and switchgrass. The rolling hills tumble down towards the treeline, which is swollen with summer growth, the shifting branches bright and juicy-green and hard to look at because of how much sunlight the leaves reflect. Clumsy bumblebees bop around between the clover blossoms. Starlings trill from the forest. Grasshoppers leap out of their path as the Party ascends. It's a perfect summer day, complete with the smell of sunbaked greenery and the beginnings of a sunburn warming on his cheeks and the back of his neck. But Will stands on the slope, gazing around at the blue sky and fluffy white clouds, and feels a prickle of phantom cold make its way up his spine.

Did he hear something? He's not sure anymore. Some little flag went up in the back of his head, just now - like when you have headphones on and you suddenly feel as though you hear someone calling your

name from across the house.

"Will?"

Will spins. Mike is looking over his shoulder, holding nothing but El's hand.

"You comin'?"

"Yeah." Will hefts his own pack, flicks the ladybug into a patch of wildflowers with a small kick, and starts up after the others. El watches him curiously for a moment, trying to meet his eyes, but he strides on past the happy couple without looking at them. He doesn't need anyone worrying about him. He's not five. He doesn't need somebody watching over him all the time.

"Aren't we high enough?" Lucas is griping, and Dustin replies without turning around. His new green and yellow *Camp Know Where '85* hat bobs as he trudges upwards. It is downright *weird* seeing him without his old cap on.

"Cerebro works best at a hundred meters."

He's inexhaustible, it seems. He's been grinning to himself ever since he broke the news.

Their quest: to assemble Cerebro at the tallest point of Weathertop so that Dustin can talk to his girlfriend.

Yeah. *Girlfriend*. Apparently, Dustin went to science camp for a month and came back with a girlfriend. It's a bit rude, really. Now Will is the only member of the group that's not paired up with someone. Which sucks. Not because he *wants* to be, mind you - just because at least pre-science-camp he had Dustin to commiserate with. They could look at Mike and El and Max and Lucas and shake their heads at each other, silently communicating, *ugh, couples, right?* Now Dustin won't shut up about how not-single he is. Which means Will is on his own.

On the other hand, this girlfriend - according to Dustin - is not only a genius, hotter than Phoebe Cates, *and* the exact right type of nerd, but - alas! - she lives in Utah. *And* she's Mormon, so her parents

would never approve of her dating Dustin. Oh, and her name is Suzie. Suzie-with-a-Z.

Will is not fully convinced that Suzie-with-a-Z, the beautiful, genius nerd with the disapproving parents, is... how do you say... *real*.

Not that he doesn't want to believe Dustin, but c'mon. He can't just call his lady-love on the telephone because her parents wouldn't approve of him because he's not Mormon, so they all have to lug a hundred pounds of equipment up the tallest hill in Hawkins so he can contact her via the Cadillac of ham radios? In Dustin's own words, *it's all a bit Shakespearean*. The thing is, Shakespeare wrote fiction.

But Will's not complaining. (Much.) The Party is back together, after all. It's what he's been waiting for practically all summer. The six of them are together - *all* together - for the first time in what feels like months, laughing and teasing and speaking in increasingly complex and self-referential inside jokes. It's almost like old times. Like when they were kids, before... well, before. Before two years of their childhood were yanked out from under their feet.

And he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand how everyone else can so easily toss aside the few shards of their old lives that they have left.

Like the chalk. He had been so happy to rediscover that old bucket of powdery sidewalk chalk in the tool shed. He had hauled it all the way to the Wheelers', because they actually have a sidewalk outside their house. He presented it with aplomb, so sure that he would be greeted with gratitude and excitement. And the others... Well, El liked it. She had never drawn with chalk before, and she got smudges of color all the way up her elbows as she worked on her doodles. But Mike got bored right off the bat, and Max and Lucas didn't even try. They just tumbled around in the front yard, trying to do cartwheels, and then started making plans to go off somewhere else.

They ended up leaving the bucket of chalk for Holly. At least *she* appreciated it.

Will can tell he's scowling, but he doesn't bother smoothing out the expression. He can blame it on the sun shining in his eyes. The

summer is half over already, and it's not fair. He never agreed to this. He never gave his consent for time to drag him inexorably along towards another school year, another anniversary, another winter. Pretty soon the temperature is going to drop, and it's all gonna start all over again. At least, that's what he can't help but be afraid of.

But it won't. The Gate is closed; the lab is dark and empty. It's over.

Will shakes himself, pausing to stretch out a cramping muscle in the back of his leg. A few feet away, Lucas tilts the contents of his canteen down his throat. Max stops to stare at him, cheeks flushed from exertion, expression incredulous. Strands of hair cling to her face and neck with sweat.

"Did you seriously just drink the rest of our water?"

Lucas looks at her, the neck flap of his sun hat flopping in the hot breeze. Then he lifts the canteen to his mouth again, spits his last sip back into it, and holds it out to Max with a proud smile.

Max's eyes meet Will's over Lucas's shoulder.

In the past half year, Max - and El, to a lesser extent - have caused Will to revise some of his opinions about girls. Namely, that girls don't play video games; girls don't read comic books; girls don't wrestle; etcetera, etcetera. Of course, it's possible that these two girls in particular are the exception. El hangs around with guys all the time, and Max is very much a tomboy, in many ways. Will would honestly be more weirded out to see Max in a poofy dress than he would be if he discovered she had joined the football team.

Will is trying not to laugh, but Max is very clearly not amused. She shakes her head, ignores the canteen, and turns for the crest - only to turn back when they hear El scream.

Everyone whirls - but it's only Mike. He's got El hoisted up against his hip, spinning her around in a clumsy, unsteady circle - and as they watch, he loses his footing. They collapse into a heap in the grass, both giggling like mad, El giving a reproachful cry of, "*Mike!*"

When they struggle upright, Mike lays a hand on her arm and leans

in. Something *pangs* in the pit of Will's stomach. It's a distant, hollow kind of hurt. He's so used to it by now that he can almost convince himself that he doesn't notice. It was worst a few months ago, when El was first allowed to venture out of the cabin. Back then, he would look away when Mike kissed her. He'd pretend not to notice. Now he just watches with that familiar cold ache twisting somewhere below his diaphragm.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Dustin watching them too. Will uses it as an excuse to look away, turning to send an eye roll in his direction.

"It's been like this all summer."

"It's romantic," Max says, and Will promptly counters, "It's gross."

"Well, you know what they say about love," Dustin says cheerfully, bouncing on his toes to shrug his load more securely onto his shoulder. "It makes you crazy. C'mon. Onwards and upwards. Suzie awaits!"

Will, Max and Lucas groan in unison.

But the light at the end of the tunnel is visible: they're almost at the crest.

Mike

It's a perfect summer day.

Especially since Mike is, right at the moment, sitting in the grass in the sun, kissing his girlfriend.

He's strong enough to lift her. Really, he is. He may not be a jock, but he's not the wimpy little kid he was two years ago. It's just, this hill is really steep, and it makes for some pretty uneven footing, and he may have gotten a little too cocky and decided to spin her around - and he fell. Thankfully, she fell on him instead of the other way around. And hey, it worked out, right? Because now he's skimming one hand from her shoulder down her arm, nudging her nose with his own so he can tilt into a quick kiss.

Okay, maybe two quick kisses.

Three?

"Mike," she laughs, and breaks away.

Four.

"Mike."

Okay, okay. Hey, look, it's not often that they get an opportunity like this. Usually when they're together, Hopper is breathing down their necks, nagging them to keep El's bedroom door cracked open "*Three inches!*" It's rare that they're able to sneak kisses without keeping a wary eye out for parental figures.

He pushes himself to his feet, grinning, and she pulls him along by the hand. Both of their hands are sweaty, from the heat and the hike, but they stopped caring about that months ago. "Come on," she urges. "Look!"

She means the top of the hill. It's in sight.

He drags a wrist over his mouth, trying to wipe off the lip gloss that rubbed off on him. El doesn't usually wear makeup, except for special occasions, but she likes the strawberry-flavored gloss that Nancy bought for her. She uses it when her lips get dry. It's been a few hours since she put it on, though, and it's gone all tacky. He doesn't know how she goes around with that stuff on her mouth all day. The stickiness is just *weird*.

El pulls them the rest of the way to the top of the hill, the proximity putting a spring in her step, and only stops when she reaches the peak. There she stands, eyes big and hair blowing in her face as she stares down into the basin. Mike puts his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath, but he lifts one hand long enough to gesture and pant, "There. See? That's Hawkins."

Her eyes roam over the scene. The roofs of buildings scattered amongst treetops. The streets that appear here and there between buildings and trees, dotted with multicolored cars the size of beetles. The trembling reflection of sunlight off of glass windows. It's a

miniature town - like the model train station Mr. Clarke brought to school once for a chemistry demonstration. (That poor little train station didn't reckon on the clay volcano.)

Behind them, Dustin is wandering back and forth, muttering about flat ground. Max and Lucas have collapsed in the clover, leaning against each other as they catch their breath, and Will is looking back the way they came, one hand shading his eyes as he squints down the hill.

"That's home?" El says softly, and Mike straightens to go stand beside her.

"Yup. See, *that's*..." He orients himself and points. "That's the school, way over there with the grayish roof. And that's the mall, over on that side."

That mall is an easy landmark to find. It's off on its own on one side of town, for one thing, and for another it's the biggest building for a mile around. At night it would be even easier to spot, all lit up by blazing lines of pink and blue neon, but for now it's just another big, blocky tan building surrounded by a glittering swarm of cars.

"So Hop's cabin would be..."

But El's head has turned. At first Mike thinks she's looking at the Hawkins National Laboratory - gathering dust, now, the whole thing locked away behind signs that read, *Warning, Restricted Area!* But instead, she points to the mass of skeletal structures being erected at the edge of town.

"What's that?"

"Oh. That's the fair. They put it up every year for the 4th of July."

She frowns at him. "Fair, like... equal."

"Different kind of fair. It's this thing they do every year where they set up this theme park with rides and games and junk food and stuff. It's like a little tiny version of Disney World."

Her eyes glitter. She knows about Disney World from Mike's stories of

the Wheelers' family vacation there, years ago.

"Can we go?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. I dunno. There's gonna be a lot of people there, and -"

Her face falls into a frown. He makes a *don't look at me* gesture.

"I dunno. Ask Hop."

"Here," Dustin's voice rings out, and they turn. He's several yards away, feet planted, and as they watch he drops his duffel bag decisively. "There's a flat spot here." He nods, once, the matter decided. Then he claps his hands together. "Let's boogie."

And so it begins. They get to work, hot and sweaty and still panting but invigorated by the success of their climb - and by Dustin's boundless enthusiasm. The hilltop is filled with noise and voices as they set about their task, scaring away birds and squirrels from the nearest treeline. Equipment jangles and rattles as they pour it out onto the grass. There are spider-like antennae to unfold, PVC pipes to snap together, a long coil of wire to wind around a metal pole, tin foil to shape, duct tape to rip with sweaty fingers, clothes hangers to affix, mosquitoes to swat, cables and cords to arrange. At one point an antenna snaps off, and Dustin makes quick work of a tree branch and some duct tape to secure it back in place. They have to backtrack several times when they realize they've skipped a step or misassembled a piece.

"Here," Mike says, as El struggles to tear off a piece of duct tape, "Let me he-"

"I can *do* it," she snaps, jerking it away from him, and he retreats with his hands up.

"Okay, jeez."

He goes back to his own task of wrapping tin foil around a clothes hanger with Will. Will meets his eyes for a moment, his lifted eyebrows meaning, *everything okay?* Mike rolls his eyes and nods - *yeah. Just El being El. You know her.*

She can be so mercurial, sometimes. It's impossible to know what he's supposed to do. Sometimes she gets frustrated with him for trying to guide her when she doesn't need help; sometimes she's mad at him for leaving her to her own devices when she apparently needed a hand. How the hell is he supposed to know which is which? It's not his fault he can't read her mind. One second everything is fine and the next they're mad at each other and he has no clue why. Sometimes he's pretty sure she doesn't know, either.

Today's been a good day, though, for the most part. Her mood has been mainly sunny, and after a few minutes she comes and headbutts his shoulder, signaling forgiveness as they jiggle a support beam into place.

And then, just when Mike is sure he couldn't be any more sunburned or sticky with duct tape residue, it's done. They give one last push, lifting the branching antlers of metal skywards, and the device settles on its platform - and stays there. It's up.

"Hey!" Dustin exclaims, giving the spindly tower an experimental push and clapping when it stands firm. "Pretty impressive, right?"

"Yeah," Will agrees, hands on his hips as he stares up at their creation.

It's makeshift, improvised, jimmy-rigged - and, yes, pretty impressive.

Dustin is already reaching for the microphone, settling down on the trampled grass. "Now. You ready to meet my love?"

They all gather around, flopping down in the grass to rest as Dustin fiddles with dials, tuning in to the right channel. An expectant atmosphere hangs over the Party as he clicks the *talk* button experimentally, cueing short bursts of static. With ceremony, he lifts the microphone to his mouth and clears his throat.

"Suzie. This is Dustin, do you copy? Over."

They wait, swatting at bugs. Dustin wiggles one sneaker, making a tall blade of grass whip side-to-side. He lifts a finger. "One sec, she's probably... She's still there. Suzie, this is Dustin. Do you copy? Over."

Static hisses gently from Cerebro's speaker. The Party sneaks glances at each other. Dustin catches them making dubious expressions and says, "I'm sure she's there, it's just - you know, maybe she's, like, busy, or..."

"Yeah," Lucas agrees.

"It's around dinnertime..."

"Mmm."

"Yup."

"... here."

Of course, in Utah it's only about mid afternoon. No one says that, though.

"Suzie, do you copy? This is Dustin, over... Suzie. Do you copy? This is Dustin. Over."

And so it goes.

While they wait, they rest. Propped up on their elbows, legs kicked out in front of them as they take in the view of the early evening sunlight slanting over Hawkins. Max and Lucas tear up handfuls of grass and toss them into the wind, watching them flutter away towards the town below. El is cuddled up to Mike's side again - *a barnacle*, he teases her - and on Mike's other side, Will is sprawled out in the grass, chewing on a stalk of it like a farmer in an old cartoon. And Mike almost laughs at the sight - almost. But he doesn't. Because right when he's about to snort, Will's head turns, and the slant of sunlight hits his eyes, lighting up the starburst of greens and browns that together make *hazel*. Mike grins instinctively. It's one of those moments where he's just quietly, immensely glad to have his best friend beside him. Living this moment with him. The smell of crushed grass and clover; the summer heat that presses against their cheeks and arms like tangible hands; the spindly shadow of Cerebro stretching out on the ground in front of them; the view of the town, laid out in miniature way down below. Will is lying close enough that the toes of their sneakers bump together if they let their ankles fall a

certain way, and when he shifts, his arm brushes Mike's. It's reassuring. Those little touches. They've always been comfortable in each other's space - a byproduct of practically growing up together - but ever since the November before last, it's become a sort of unspoken language. Nudging shoulders or bumping arms means, *Hello, I'm here, and you're here, and all is well.*

Will sits forward a little. "So, tonight we're gonna start that new campaign, right?"

From a couple feet away, Lucas says, "No, tonight we're going to the movies."

"Is that tonight?" Max says, and then squints at the angle of the sun. "Are we gonna make it?"

"If we head out soon, yeah. Steve's on shift tonight, remember? We were gonna see that one about time travel."

"Suzie, this is Dustin, do you copy? Over."

Mike pulls a face. "I dunno if we can make that, actually."

"We will if we go," Lucas says, and stands, offering a hand to Max. "Up and at 'em, Madmax."

Mike shakes his head. Hair sticks to the back of his neck with sweat and he reaches up to push it away. "I mean El. She's not really supposed to go into town."

El's warm weight disappears from his side. "I want to go." She pushes herself upright, brushing dirt and grass off of the oversized blue shirt that swallows three quarters of her entire body. It used to be Hop's, once upon a time, until she decided she liked it and it became hers. "We'll be careful."

"The mall is super busy. *And* it'll be past your curfew. You're gonna get in trouble."

He can see her digging in her heels, a scowl developing between her brows. "You always get to go to the movies. I never do. I want to go."

Mike sighs, gearing up for an argument, but then Max cuts in.

"She'll be fine, Mike. What are you, her parent? Anyway, she'll blend right into the crowd."

"I'll blend right in," El echoes.

"Suzie, this is Dustin, do you copy? Over."

"She does look pretty normal now," Will offers, and Lucas says, "Yeah, and we'll protect her, right?"

Lucas chucks her on the chin and she snaps her teeth at him playfully.

"She's been in town before and it was fine."

Mike hefts himself to his feet, shaking his head. "Okay, fine. Just don't expect me to explain to Hop why you're late, okay? I'm not having that conversation again. You get to field that one. Deal?"

El thrusts out a hand before he even finishes talking. "Deal."

"So," Will says from the ground, "Tomorrow for D&D, then?"

"I can't, I said I'd -"

"Hang out with El tomorrow," Will finishes for him, his voice going a tad flat with disappointment. Mike shrugs uncomfortably and Will stands. "I thought you said we'd play this week."

"I know, but..." His arms flop at his sides, helplessly. "Maybe next week, okay? I just haven't had a chance to work on it. I'll finish making the campaign this weekend."

And by *finish* he means *start*. He just hasn't had time, okay? He's been busy. He didn't see El for like a year, and then she was locked away in the cabin for the winter. Now he actually gets to spend time with her regularly. It's not his fault that he hasn't had time to sit down and plan a whole campaign. And anyway, they have other things to do. It's summer. They should be outside, or at the pool, or the mall or something.

And speaking of -

"Hey." Lucas thumps Dustin on the shoulder. "We gotta go, man. Daylight's fading. We're gonna miss the movie."

Billy

Chlorine is a shitty excuse for saltwater.

Like everything else in this town, the Hawkins Public Pool is a pathetically small, second-rate, wannabe imitation of the real thing. But it's the closest thing they have, and he's stuck here.

Anyway, it does have its perks. He gets paid to work on his tan and play the hero, doesn't he? And the lifeguard chair provides a splendid view of all the best sights that Hawkins has to offer.

Here comes one such sight now.

Heather Holloway is a sweet little number. Nothing to write home about, and her cherry-red lifeguard suit does her figure no real favors. But she smirks at Billy as they pass each other, twirling her whistle around one finger, and her tits jiggle just slightly in her suit as she sweeps through the crowd towards the locker rooms. A wave of coconut sunscreen and some sparkling, expensive perfume washes past him in her wake.

She's the kind of girl he would have taken for a midnight swim, back home.

Then again, maybe she'd be interested in a midnight swim here. They're staff, after all - and Billy just happens to have a key to the pool. Maybe she's into skinny dipping. He might just find out what's under that shapeless swimsuit.

Billy sticks the whistle between his teeth and gives a sharp blast.

"Hey, Lardass!"

The tubby kid on the far side of the pool screeches to a halt, eyes comically wide. Like a deer in the headlights. A fat, fat deer.

"No running on my watch," Billy says, sternly. He doesn't even need to yell. The pool has gone respectfully quiet. "I gotta warn you again and you're banned for life. You wanna be banned for life, Lardass?"

The kid's head shakes back and forth.

"Didn't think so."

Another blast of the whistle, and the chatter starts up again. Beach balls bounce high into the air. Pool floats knock together like lethargic bumper cars. Some kids near the shallow end are playing chicken, and Billy feigns casting a protective eye over them as he passes the row of lounging middle-aged mothers. They adore him. They think he's just *the sweetest young man*, always keeping an eye out for the kids in the pool, playing big brother.

He climbs into the lifeguard chair with a practiced hop, settling in to survey his domain. It's his last hour on shift, before the pool closes for the day, and the sunlight slopes through the chain link fence, tinted ruddy-gold from the approaching sunset.

He despises this town. But he's practically a king here, so what can he say? There are worse ways to pass the time.

A bike bell draws his attention away, through the fence, to the street beyond the parking lot.

Well, whaddya know? Maxine. He'd recognize that tangled mess of hair anywhere. She's coasting down the street beside her hick friends, the wheels of her dumb little-kid skateboard roaring obnoxiously in the middle of a small crowd of bikes. He dares her to look his way. To meet his eyes through the fence. But she's oblivious to the death threats he's beaming into the back of her skull, and after a moment they swing around a curve in the road and vanish from sight.

He turns back to the pool.

Somebody oughta knock that little bitch down a peg. He's tired of her running around town like she owns the place.

Shoppers yelp and dodge out of the way with indignant reprimands as the Party sprints through Starcourt Mall. They leave a trail of *hey!s* and *watch where you're going!s* as they maneuver through the crowd, and Will lifts one hand of apology, shouting back, "Sorry! 'Scuse me!"

His backpack knocks against the small of his back with every step, heavy and rattling with their haul. If they hadn't stopped at the convenience store to get snacks first they wouldn't be late - but what fun is a movie without twizzlers, skittles, and soda that may or may not explode when you try to open it?

They skid past a sunglasses kiosk, around a corner, and tumble down an escalator packed with people. The mall is a shiny blur around them. Glossy floor and glass skylights. Blue and pink tubes of neon, spelling out *STARCOURT* on the sign above the food court - as if they could possibly forget where they are. The pots of lush greenery, fronds and leaves straight out of the Amazon; the shining round lights dotted along the ceiling like a runway; the ten-foot-tall advertisements full of impossibly perfect food and hair and athletic men and women laughing and holding up their products. It really is like another world, like another planet. They pass the Camera Repair shop, the jungle-safari-like front of Banana Republic, the Gap, and hurdle through the front entrance of their destination: Scoops Ahoy, lower level, just past the food court.

Will tilts his watch to see the time. "Made it."

Mike makes a beeline for the counter, tapping repeatedly at the bell despite the long-suffering girl standing behind the counter. She takes one look at the Party, rolls her eyes, and calls, "Hey, Dingus, your children are here." Behind her, the frosted glass partition slams open.

Even Steve Harrington himself can't make the Scoops Ahoy uniform look good. In the navy blue sailor suit, red sash, and the white cap pulled down over his trademark hair, it's hard to believe he was once loved and feared on the grounds of Hawkins High. There's a smudge of chocolate on his jaw, which he swipes at ineffectually as he sighs.

"Again? Seriously?"

Mike looks at the Party. The Party looks at Mike. Mike turns to Steve,

reaches out, and gives the service bell one more cheeky swipe.

That's when Steve's eyes move past Mike and land on Dustin.

In about two seconds flat, he's sliding through the back room door, hands lifting into the air like he just shot the winning basket. "Henderson." Dustin laughs, throwing up his own arms in a celebratory greeting, and Steve repeats, "Henderson!" with a leap into the air, swinging around the counter. "He's back!"

"I'm back! You got the job!"

"I got the job!" Steve plays a fanfare on a small imaginary trumpet, then dives in for their secret handshake, which devolves immediately into a lightsaber battle. Steve loses, dramatically miming his guts falling out, and then gives Will's hair a teasing tousle when he notices him watching. The same way Jonathan does, sometimes.

Steve helped the Party last November. Will was - well - a bit out for the count, at that point. But he's heard about it from various members of the Party, his mom, Jonathan, Hopper. Bit by bit, he's stitched together a complete picture of what happened that night. The lab. The trap. The tunnels. Bob. The shed... He remembers the shed.

He's standing directly under a flow of air conditioning, and the frigid air seems to crawl down the back of his shirt, making him wince.

She shed, and the phone ringing, and the Mind Flayer's army, and waking with a start with his wrists and ankles chafed raw, bound to a cot as he burned alive and *they were in the tunnels*, he saw them, he *knew*, in the now-memories, Steve and Mike and Dustin and Max and Lucas, they were in the tunnels and *they set him on fire* -

Stop.

Breathe.

Focus. The mall. He's at the mall. With his friends. They're about to sneak into *Back to the Future* and eat candy and enjoy the air conditioning. Normal teenagers doing normal teenage stuff, on a normal summer day.

Will tunes back in to the conversation, glancing around to see if anyone noticed him zoning out for a second there. Thankfully, they're all still focused on Steve. Dustin is saying something about his ambiguously-existent girlfriend and Steve is nodding along with interest, twirling his ice cream scoop like a weapon. There's an old Patsy Cline song playing softly from the Scoops Ahoy store radio. Max is teasing Lucas about something. El is looking around at the ice cream shop, seeming particularly intrigued by the rows of colorful frozen dessert behind the glass display case. Mike is giving Dustin a skeptical look, clearly not entirely convinced that his science camp girlfriend could possibly be hotter than Phoebe Cates. Will's heart rate starts to go down again.

Yeah. It's good to have the Party together again. Maybe now that Dustin is back, things will start going back to normal.

The girl behind the counter leans forward, quirking one eyebrow at her coworker as he's swarmed by the small crowd of teenagers. "How many children are you friends with?"

Lucas, checking his own watch, has started to poke and prod the Party in the direction of the door. "C'mon," he urges, "We need to get going. Catch up later. Let's go, hustle!"

It's as they're passing through the back room, ducking through the door into the staff access corridor, that Steve suddenly notices the girl attached to Mike's hand. He points at her as she passes.

"Are you even supposed to be here?"

Mike tugs El through the doorway. "Just let us through, we're gonna miss the beginning."

Steve shakes his head, waving them through like they're soldiers sneaking across enemy lines.

"I swear," he calls after them, "If anybody hears about this -"

"*We're dead*," Will, Mike, Max and Lucas all finish in unison.

"Uh," Dustin says as they half-jog down the narrow white hallway, "Are we allowed to be back here?"

"No," Will and Mike both say, and exchange a grin.

Mike hit a growth spurt a few months ago. Will did not. Well, his mom insists that he's been growing like a weed, but apparently he's never going to catch up to his best friend. Mike, as always, stands a few inches over him. It seems he hasn't quite gotten used to his gangly limbs, though; his movements are clumsy, awkward. He nearly trips over his own shoes as he half-turns, trying to run backwards for a moment as he counts heads, making sure no one got left behind. His bangs flop in his eyes, and he flicks them back with a jerk of his head.

Mike's hair has, if anything, gotten wilder over the years. It was wavy before, sure, but now it's like it's caught halfway between *wavy* and *curly*. And the heat has not helped. A day in the summer humidity has turned it fluffy and unkempt, strands curling over his ears and getting caught on his eyelashes where they fall over his face.

"Here," Mike instructs, mostly for the benefit of Dustin and El, and the Party comes to a halt at the back door to the theater. Mike cracks it open and pokes his head out. "All clear."

They make it just in time.

The theater is packed, so Max, Lucas, and Dustin end up one row down and a few seats to the left. Will, meanwhile, spots three conveniently empty seats near the middle, and he steers Mike and El towards them. They clamber over people's feet, muttering apologies. El has wedged herself firmly between Mike and Will, as if trying to use them to physically shield herself from the eyes of the crowded movie theater. She's not used to being in a place with so many people, and it's making her a bit shy as they finally reach their destination.

"God, I love air conditioning," Mike sighs as he flops into the middle seat.

Will groans, "God, I love *not standing*."

Mike leans forward, stretching out a hand to poke Lucas in the back of the head. "See, Lucas, we made it."

"We missed the previews."

"Still made it," Max counters.

Dustin, beside Lucas, takes off his hat to fan himself with before jamming it back down over his curls.

El is all big brown eyes, watching the pre-movie concessions advertisement like it's the most fascinating thing she's ever seen. Will opens up his backpack to distribute candy to the Party members in the row below, and Mike digs in without waiting for permission, choosing Reeces Pieces for himself.

Softly, as if speaking to herself, El says, "That is a *big* TV."

Will leans across Mike to offer her a choice of candy. She takes skittles - probably because she knows that twizzlers are Will's favorite, so she's leaving those for him.

He's happy she's here. No, really, he is. He's happy to have El with them. He's happy to see *her* happy, out in the world, having fun. But as the lights dim and the low chatter dies down into an expectant silence, Will can't help but feel a little twinge of irritation. This is supposed to be *their* thing. His and Mike's. They've been going to movies with Lucas and Max all summer. This is *their* ritual. It's supposed to be one of the few El-free times Will has left with Mike, when Mike isn't single mindedly focused on his girlfriend. It's not fair. Mike is supposed to be leaning over to too-loudly whisper commentary to *Will* as they watch. He's supposed to rest his arm on the armrest between him and *Will*, nudge *Will's* pinky with his own to get his attention, sneak pieces of *Will's* candy.

He can't be mad at El - actually, scratch that, yes he can. He just knows that he *shouldn't* be. El is half the reason he's alive. And besides that, they understand each other. To the mystification of the Party, they can just look at each other and be on the same wavelength. It's been that way since their first official meeting, days after the Gate, when El walked straight into the weak hug that Will offered. He recognized her, of course, and not just from the Party's stories. He still remembers a halfway-tangible hand in his own, the blurred silhouette of a pink dress phasing in and out of existence in

front of his eyes, the soft, distant voice -

Will? Your mom - she's coming for you.

And his answer, pressed out from aching lungs between cracked lips -
Hurry.

Just... just hold on a little longer. Will. Will?

"Will?"

He turns. El's eyes flick from his own down to his twizzlers, and he throws one at her with a playful scoff. She catches it and sticks it in her mouth, content.

The movie is starting.

Will ranks movies based on how easily they can make him forget the outside world. A score of one means, *what movie?* and a score of ten means, *what real world?*

This one is an eight.

Will gets swept up in the story, delighted by the clocks and the Delorean and all the old-fashioned '50s stuff and Doc Brown's exaggerated facial expressions - and captivated by Marty McFly's skateboard, turned-up collar, guitar, and handsomely rumpled hair. He's even able to mostly forget how crisp the air conditioning is, in here. The air smells like buttered popcorn; his tongue is probably stained red with artificial strawberry; and for the first time in a long day of hiking and racing across town, he's sitting down in a comfy chair. A good end to a good day.

His mood is dampened just a tad when he glances over and happens to see Mike's fingers linked with El's, as per the usual.

"Whoa. Whoa, Doc, stuck here?" Marty says from the screen. *"I can't be stuck here, I got a life in 1985! I got a girl!"*

"Is she pretty?"

"Ah, she's beautiful."

Will looks back to the screen, because he doesn't want to see the meaningful, affectionate glance that Mike sends his girlfriend.

"She's crazy about me. Look at this. Look what she wrote here, Doc, I mean, that says it all. Doc... You're my only hope."

Crazy about me.

Yeah, crazy -

"Marty, I'm sorry. But the only power source capable of generating 1.21 gigawatts of electricity is a bolt of lightning."

At first Will thinks that the sudden darkness is part of the movie. And then, when the audience groans and he sees that even the *exit* signs above the doors have gone dark, he realizes what happened.

"Aw, c'mon," Lucas gripes from somewhere in the darkness.

There's a general muttering and shuffling as the packed theater protests the blackout.

Spreading.

Where his hand rests on his thigh, Will's fingers twitch.

It's spreading.

The blackout.

Sweeping across Hawkins in a powerful, silent surge. He doesn't know how he knows, but he does. He can feel it. Hot bulbs going dark; buzzing wires falling inert, lifeless.

Everything inside of Will drops. A horrible, sick, sinking, numb-cold *swoop* that starts to spiral somewhere in his gut, tingling up his spine and at the base of his skull, prickling at the back of his neck until one hand twitches up to press at the skin there.

It's moving.

The knowledge comes to him unbidden, imparted to him with a sinuous, papery, reverberating flutter - like the sound of thousands of insect wings all beating at once, and Will wants to scream, he wants to bolt out of his chair, but he's frozen.

His fingers are shaking. Something at the pit of his throat is shaking. His whole body feels like it's sinking through the floor, leaving itself behind, his limbs going cold and weak as if he's about to faint. His head swims.

Sluggishly, as if in a dream, he drags his hand off of his neck and gropes for the seat next to him. His mouth is already forming the M, voice ready to croak out one single syllable, when his fingers rake through thin, cold air.

There's no one in the seat beside him. There's no one in the whole theater. The air-conditioned, popcorn-scented air has gone frigid and sour, and Will is on his feet. Turning in circles. Scanning the dilapidated space wildly, shoes fumbling and slipping over slick, fleshy vines.

No.

No, no, no, *no*, *no no no* -

His eyes haven't adjusted to the dark, but the blueish gray palette of shadows is so horribly, cruelly familiar. And the fluttering - that dry, hissing, grinding *flutter* seems to spike through his whole body, shooting through him from neck to fingertips to toes, making him grimace, driving his feet forwards in a panicked, instinctual stumble towards the door.

It's not real.

He tells himself that as he shoulders open the swinging door, coughs into his hands at the sting of toxins in his lungs. The coughing is as sharp as gunshots in the dead silence, echoing harshly through the darkness as he propels himself through the theater lobby. Spores drift listlessly in the stale air, bringing back a thousand memories, a thousand deeply ingrained instincts to *run* and *hide* and -

It's not real. I'm not here. Not really.

He's twelve years old again. Cold and alone and scared, the soles of his sneakers skidding on sludge. Jerking away with a half-swallowed sob as a fringe of dangling vines comb over his cheek.

The lobby opens up into the mall, and Will comes to a halt. Starcourt is hollow. Storefronts devoid of products, of people. A few lights waver to life here and there as he passes, faint and blue-tinted, their meager glow smothered under softly rustling tendrils. He's acclimating to the silence, the quiet pressing in against his eardrums like a high air pressure, and now his ears are picking up on the barely-detectable whispers and chitters of the Upside Down. The sound of vines growing, moving, shifting. The sound of creatures skittering into the shadows, somewhere unseen.

Like Dart, something in the back of his mind whispers.

The back of his throat opens, a call for Mike rising instinctually, but he bites down on it before it reaches his lips. He shakes his head, hard. Like he's trying to wake himself up after nearly nodding off in class. He's not a little kid anymore. It's not real. It can't be real. The Gate is closed. Nothing has happened since November. It's just in his head. He can snap himself out of it.

His eyes squeeze shut. He clenches his fists at his sides, splays out his fingers until the tendons ache, breathes five long breaths. His throat scratches with the cold, acrid air, but he forces himself to breathe smoothly. The chittering grows louder, darting past him, coming close enough that he can feel something brush past his shoelace. But it's not real. He won't cringe away. He won't let these memories control him. He *won't*.

When he opens his eyes, he's still there.

His skin crawls. His eyes trace up, over the shadowy silhouettes of the food court, over the vine-choked space above, past the neon *STARCOURT* sign that gutters and flares in sporadic bursts. And beyond the great glass skylight, there's a shape. Dark - dark as the void of space, like a hole cut out of the universe. Looking at him. Watching him. The numb-cold *swoop* drains through him again,

stronger this time as the Mind Flayer's featureless head lowers towards the skylight.

A broken whimper twists in Will's chest. Fear takes over. His mind goes blank, body reacting on animal instinct as his feet shove him back, *away* -

No -

No, please -

Lights flare at random, strobing, flickering across the length of the mall, static popping in Will's clothes, and oh god he *sees* him, he knows Will is here, he's *looking at him* -

Will can feel him beckoning. Calling to him. He's getting closer, pressing down towards the glass, and Will can hear the *whooshing*, rumbling roar, muffled through the roof, and he's still backing up, back into the theater lobby, lungs pistoning behind his ribs - *Go away! Go away! Go* - dread and powerlessness and panic cutting through him in sharp, icy waves, and *not again, please not again, it's not real it's not real it's not real, please please* -

An abrupt grip on his upper arm makes him sputter, his scream getting tangled up in his mouth before it can come out, and Mike's dark eyes go even wider with worry.

Mike.

Mike's oh-so-familiar features, lit by the warm gold-and-pink glow of the lobby displays. The smell of buttered popcorn. A curious glance or two from the people milling around, who doubtless just witnessed Will's erratic flight.

Relief swells so abruptly in Will's chest that it bubbles up over his lips as a watery laugh.

Not real.

His head whips up, scanning the skylights that are just visible beyond the overhang of the second level. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. He's not there. Will's heart is wobbling hard between his lungs, adrenaline

pounding at his temples and fingertips, and his -

His shoes. They're wet. The soles slimy with the residue of... of...

Soda. He must have stepped in some soda. Yes - yes, there. There's a banana-yellow *caution, wet floor!* sign propped up a few yards away. He just stepped in something as he crossed the lobby, that's all. He breathes hard, consciously slowing the push-pull of his diaphragm, clearing out the phantom chill from his lungs.

He registers all at once that Mike has been saying his name. Will focuses in on the face of his best friend - the tapered cheeks, nearly devoid of the baby fat that used to round them out. The smattering of freckles over his sunburnt nose. The dark half-curling waves falling over his forehead, one strand just barely brushing the eyelashes of his left eye. He's staring down into Will's face with an expression of alarm, and when their eyes meet, he repeats, "Are you okay?"

Mike

Deja vu is making Mike's head spin. It's a sick, sinking feeling, like realizing all at once that you've forgotten something important. Like thinking that there's one more stair than there is, and stepping into empty space with a disorienting jolt. Because Mike has seen Will like this before.

Will is gasping for breath, his body trembling under Mike's palm, his eyes wild. The skin of his arm is chilled from the air conditioning, peppered with goosebumps.

"Will? Are you okay?"

But Will doesn't seem to hear him. His chin is tilted up, eyes flickering over the ceiling like he expects to find something there.

"Will?"

His breath begins to even out. His head turns, scanning the lobby of the movie theater.

"Will?"

Finally, Mike's voice seems to filter through whatever haze is surrounding him, and hazel eyes meet Mike's.

"Are you okay?"

Something strange happens then. As he looks over Mike's face, Will's eyes lower for a moment, like he's glancing at Mike's mouth. And for a fraction of a second, it sets off an automatic response in the back of Mike's brain. He shuts down the impulse as soon as it rears its head, but it was there: for a split second, Mike was about to tilt forward and... Well, no, not really. Of course he didn't *really* think about kissing Will. It's just that he's been with El all day, so he's still in boyfriend mode. It was automatic.

Still, the impulse startles him enough that he drops his hand from Will's arm as Will opens his mouth to answer.

"Yeah," Will mumbles. "I'm... yeah. Fine."

Mike can't help it. He pushes. "Are you sure?"

He's expecting Will to be mad at him. To roll his eyes or snap a retort or turn away, because he hates when people fuss over him, and Mike *knows* he hates it. But instead, Will just looks back out at the mall for a moment. He's rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. This must have been a bad one.

"f course," Will mutters eventually. He scuffs one foot along the carpet, like he's trying to wipe something off his shoe.

It was the blackout that must have done it. Will's panic attacks sometimes come on with no obvious rhyme or reason, but when there is a trigger - say, for example, abrupt, total darkness - they can be twice as bad. He seems better now, though. Calmer. More grounded. Mike decides against throwing an arm around Will's shoulders, in case he gets shoved off with an annoyed bark of, *I'm fine*, but he risks an elbow bump.

"C'mon," he coaxes, "They're about to get the movie running again."

Will turns at Mike's nudge without complaint, and they fall into step side-by-side as they make their way back to their seats. The Party

greet them with anxious stares and whispers of, "Is he okay?" and "What happened?" Will waves off their concern, putting on a mask of nonchalance, and tosses off a line about *fresh air*.

Before they can question him further, the film reel sputters, and the movie kicks into gear again.

"*A bolt of lightning!*" Doc Brown exclaims. The audience cheers as the film resumes. Will sticks a twizzler in his mouth and Mike makes himself look at the screen. "*Unfortunately, you never know when or where it's ever gonna strike!*"

Marty slaps the *Save the Clock Tower!* flyer and thrusts it at the mad scientist, suave and handsome in his denim jacket with its popped-up collar.

"*We do now.*"

Will

Will waves goodbye to Dustin and Lucas and eases the front door shut behind him, breathing a sigh of relief. They rode home with him, keeping him company on the dimly lit back roads. It's a mile further than they had to bike, and he hates asking for this - he hates making them go out of their way just because he's *weak*. But they aren't usually out so late without arranging for a ride home, and besides, after his episode earlier... well, he was grateful for their boisterous shouts, their bikes flanking his. Now, as he locks the door and slots the security chain into its track, he lets out a breath. Kicks off his sneakers and sets them carefully aside - not dropping them as he usually does. He can't wake up his mom, or there'll be hell to pay. If he can sneak into his room without alerting her, she'll assume he got home soon after she went to bed. She had an opening shift early this morning; he'd be willing to bet she passed out by 9:00.

Mike had to take El back to the cabin after the movie and Max and Lucas will be heading to their respective houses for the night, but Dustin will be on his way back to Weathertop. If Suzie is a fabrication, she's one that Dustin is staunchly committed to. When the movie ended and the Party stood up from their seats, stretching,

Dustin clapped his hands and said, "*Right! So, back to Cerebro then?*" The Party glanced at each other. Feet shuffled. Dustin got the hint pretty quickly.

There's a light on in the kitchen. Will slows, his heart sinking. And then, with no other choice - he has to pass by to get to his room, one way or another - he tiptoes closer on socked feet.

His mother is waiting for him. She perches at the kitchen table, the window cracked open to let out the smoke from her cigarette. The light above the sink is the only light on in the house, and it lends a yellowish pallor to the room. She stands when she notices him, hurriedly shoving the cigarette into the ashtray, and strides the two paces across the room.

"Where have you been?"

She reaches out, maybe to squeeze his shoulder or tilt his face, see if he's hurt, and he ducks aside. He's still on edge from earlier, and her accusatory eyes get his hackles up immediately.

"Just at the movies with everyone." It comes out a little sharper than he intended. He takes a half-step towards his room, but she holds him in place with a look.

She stutters for a moment, hands fluttering in front of her like she's trying to pluck the words out of the air. Her hair is a wild mass of chestnut, loose around her shoulders. "And you didn't think to call, let me know?"

His head swivels in a gesture caught partway between apologetic and defensive. He's avoiding her eyes, pacing sideways, reaching out to needlessly arrange items on the counter. "We got there late. I didn't have time to stop by the payphone."

When he turns back she's pacing the length of the room, one elbow cupped in the opposite palm, her free hand gesturing. "I thought for *sure* that something was wrong, I - I - I just *felt* like -"

Her voice is pitching up, thinning out the way it does when she's really anxious, and guilt stirs Will's insides around like a fork. He

mumbles, "I'm sorry," but she's not done.

"I didn't know where you were, if you were - were *safe*, if something happened -"

"Nothing happened," he says - too quickly, and too loudly. Her eyes narrow. She can hear the lie in his voice, and they both know it. He repeats it, lowly. "Nothing happened."

"Will."

It's part reproach, part statement, part question.

If anything, she's gotten worse in the past half year - even though she *promised* she'd give him some space. And the more he loses patience with it, the more it turns into a vicious cycle. The more she hovers, the more he pulls away and tends to avoid her, which leads to more worrying and more hovering.

"I'm sorry," he says again. "I just... I forgot to call. I'm sorry."

"You know, I will come get you - no matter how late it is, no matter where you are, you can always call me and I can come -"

He snaps. "I didn't need a ride! I'm not nine years old, I can go to a movie with my friends on my own."

"I know," she says - softly. And just like that he's not angry anymore, because she really does look sorry - sorry, and tense, and anxious, and Will deflates. He drags a hand over his face, pushing back the bangs that are starting to get just a little too long again.

"I'll call next time. Okay? Can we just... I'm really tired. It's been a long day."

She knows he's not telling her something, and he knows that she knows. It hangs in the air between them, along with a gossamer ribbon of smoke that swirls up from the half-dead cigarette in the ashtray. He holds her gaze for one heartbeat, two, and then drops his eyes to his socks. A clear line marks where his shoes used to be; above that, the powdery dirt from Weathertop turns the white socks to gray-brown.

She doesn't say *okay*. And after a few moments, he gets tired of waiting. He turns for his room, muttering a *goodnight* over his shoulder.

Dustin

Dustin's clothes are covered in a fine layer of dirt, courtesy of Weathertop. Strike that: his entire body is covered in dirt, hat to sneakers.

"Suzie, this is Dustin. Do you copy? Over."

Smooth, steady, empty static. It's the soundtrack to his life today, it seems.

It's not too late yet. She could still be awake. It's a couple hours earlier for her, after all.

He's been fiddling with the switchboard. It's gotta be an issue of frequency. If he could just hit on the right channel...

"Suzie, this is Dustin, do you copy? Over."

He's said the words so many times today that the sounds are starting to detach from their meaning. Copy. Copy. Co-py. Cooo-pyy. Copy copy copy. He tweaks the dials almost at random, slapping at a mosquito. He's hot, he's tired, his friends all abandoned ship when it got dark, and he can't get into contact with his girlfriend. She probably thinks he forgot about her. No, she wouldn't think that. But he said he'd radio her first thing when he got home, and - what if he never gets into contact with her? Son of a bitch, this whole plan was stupid. Why didn't they just trade phone numbers as a plan B? They were so sure this was going to work. *He* was so sure this was going to work. It was supposed to *work*.

"Goddamnit," he grunts, and slaps at the switchboard with a spike of irritation. Knobs and dials jolt out of alignment, the static from the speaker squealing. And then -

A voice.

He heard a voice.

He dives for the microphone, fumbles, drops it in the grass and snatches it up again. At the same time, he yanks the tape recorder out of his duffel bag. Look, the Party clearly doesn't believe him, okay? If he can just get her voice on tape - even just a simple, *hi, I'm Suzie, hello from Utah!* - then they can all stop casting judgmental glances at each other when they think he's not looking.

He jabs at the red circle on the tape recorder, then gets a good grip on the microphone. "Suzie? Suzie, is that you?"

Distorted feedback. He lunges for the switchboard, lying on his stomach in the prickly grasses to hone in on the signal.

"Suzie, this is Dustin. Do you copy? Over."

The voice fades out into static, strengthens again, and all at once he has it - and it's not her. It's a man's voice. Deep, professional, and authoritative. Dustin lets his head fall forward onto the ground, groaning. Damnit.

"...use a full light of twelve percent solar brightness at an angle five-point-one-four-five degrees to the elliptic. The light should reflect back giving access within seconds. Over."

"Copy that, over."

His head lifts.

Static returns, hissing and hiccuping over the *cheep* of crickets.

Dustin sits up, folding his legs criss-cross-applesauce and scrutinizing the speaker in his hands. He looks up at his creation, then back down, finally remembering to hit *stop* on the tape recorder. Fireflies wink among the grasses, and Dustin traces his tongue along his braces as the static remains unbroken.

"Huh," he says finally, aloud. And then, picking up the tape recorder and bouncing it in one hand, as if the message it now holds has a tangible weight - "What was that?"

2. Episode Two: The Mall Rats - Part One

Nancy

"Shit."

Rheum grits the corners of Nancy's eyes, itchy and dry. The skin of her face feels oily, grimy from sleeping in her makeup, and yesterday's curls fall into her eyes as she lurches upright with a stomach-clenching jolt.

Something is wrong.

It's too bright. The quality of light - it's too bright. Too clear, too warm, filtering in through the sheet tacked over the window.

It is not 7:00am.

She twists and seizes up her watch from the bedside table.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!" she spits, and Jonathan starts up from the bedding, groggy and concerned, his hair as much a mess as hers and flat on one side from bedhead.

"Wha? What's wrong?"

"It's almost nine," she groans, flinging the covers off and rolling to her feet.

"What?"

"We forgot to reset the clocks - the power went out last night, remember?"

She's running on her toes across the room, Jonathan's soft, old tee hanging loose and comfortable around her frame, her legs bare. The room is in the same state they left it last night - that is to say, a mess. A welcoming, familiar mess, strewn with boyishness, cluttered with the accumulated artifacts and bric-a-brac of eighteen years of life. It's not a particularly foreign sight. Nancy has woken up here nearly as often as in her own bedroom, lately. Warm yellow-ish tan-ish walls;

the white-grid bedsheet tacked up over the window as a curtain; the R.E.M. poster beside the bed. Clothes draped over the back of a chair, one of Will's drawings propped up on the dresser, the faded green bedding rumpled and pulled loose from one corner of the mattress.

"Oh, shit," Jonathan agrees vehemently, staggering upright with the kind of angry, sloppy urgency only ever achieved by someone who has badly overslept. He jump-skids directly over the bed, trying to wrestle a pair of pants onto his legs as Nancy yanks yesterday's dress up around her waist. A sharp "Whoawhoawhoa -" and a loud thump informs her, without looking, that Jonathan has gotten tangled in his pants and fallen on his face.

Business-formal dresses; heels; early mornings; coffee runs and forced smiles; ink-stained fingertips, phone calls and jeers. This has been her summer. While Mike has been running around with his friends, giggling with his girlfriend, going to movies and eating ice cream - typical, carefree kid-summer stuff - she's been cooped up in the stuffy back room of Hawkins Post, scrambling back and forth in her loathsome pointy shoes, running errands and answering phones for men in dress shirts and ties.

To be fair, it's not like she didn't sign up for this. And it's gonna get her where she wants to go - it is. It's a foot in the door, as her mother would say. But right at the moment, as she flings her purse and shoes out the window, she envies her little brother. Why can't she be fourteen again, gallivanting around town in jeans and a tee shirt, blowing bubbles and playing in the sprinklers with her girl friends?

The childish thought dissipates as a practiced hop takes her onto the window frame, which bites into her hip for a moment before she lands barefoot on the crispy-sharp grass. Stooping to gather up her shoes and purse, staying low to crouch-run underneath the kitchen window. The summer heat has already started to gather in the air like a tangible mist, pushing past her cheeks as she reaches the car and cranes her neck to watch for her boyfriend.

"C'mon, c'mon," she mutters to herself, hooking first one foot and then the other into her shoes, the heel of one hand braced on the car for balance. Tom's gonna skin her alive if she's late.

Jonathan, at last, whirls out the front door. She flings herself into the passenger seat the very second he unlocks the door, already stirring up the contents of her purse for makeup, using spit, a Kleenex, and willpower to clean up yesterday's smudged and creased eyeshadow. She can touch it up and call it intentional. It'll have to do.

An upbeat Huey Lewis song bounces along at a brisk clip, all electric guitar and keyboard and static as the old car radio sputters to life. Jonathan cranks the car into reverse and swings around with agonizing caution, and she checks her watch again as they finally get going down the driveway.

Joyce managed to talk Jonathan into a haircut a couple months ago, when they started their internship. He has bangs again, now, the way he did when they first got to know each other. He hates it. He's constantly griping about how he can't wait until they grow out and he can sweep them to the side again. He swipes at them now, still blinking away remnants of sleep as they bounce over the long driveway and pull out onto the road.

Nancy can't tell if she agrees or not; with the bangs and the tucked-in work shirts, tie constantly too loose around his collar, and the camera slung around his neck on a thick strap, he looks like even more of a geek than usual. It's kind of endearing, kind of groan-worthy. Then again, she can't say she's been faring much better in that department of late. Her ill-advised perm has gone frizzy and unkempt, especially in this heat, and more often than not they have matching dark circles under their eyes.

"Can you please drive faster?"

"What, you wanna break down?" Jonathan slaps the dash. "We're lucky this thing still drives at all."

Buffing blush onto her cheeks - "I'm serious, Jonathan, I can't be late."

"You mean we can't be late," he retorts, a hint of annoyance creeping into his tone.

"No, I mean I can't be late. They like you no matter what you do."

"Hey, they like you too." He turned to look at her, and the car swerves a bit as he glances back to the road and corrects their veering course with a jerk.

"Yeah, they like that I'm a coffee delivery machine. They don't actually like me or respect me as a living, breathing human with a brain -"

She cuts off to swipe at her eyelashes with mascara and Jonathan's head turns back and forth as he looks between her and the road. "Hey, you just - you just gotta be patient. Okay?" She gives a small scoff, but he keeps trying. "They're set in their ways, you know? But... Once they realize what a gifted writer you are, they'll come around."

She turns with a double-palmed gesture, half-twisting in her seat to address him. "I really don't need a Jonathan Byers pep talk right now. Okay? Just - can you please drive faster?"

He blows out a breath as she paws at the sun visor and flips open the little mirror inside, using it to stroke lipstick along the curve of her bottom lip. "Okay."

The old car swings around a curve, accelerating with a pitiful whine as they race the clock towards the dusty brick corners of downtown Hawkins.

"You think you can follow the clues and solve the case of the missing danish, Nancy Drew?"

The words seem to follow her around as she shreds a pile of papers and then rushes to the next item on her neverending to-do list: coffee.

It's been nonstop. Tom chewed them out first thing when they arrived, and Paul even wolf-whistled from his place at the conference table. Smug bastard. Not to mention that she's hyper-aware that she's wearing the same dress she was in yesterday, which a) is not very professional, and b) only adds fuel to the fire of jeers from the predominantly male staff of the Post, who just love to poke fun at her and Jonathan. At least Jonathan got to mumble some apologies and duck into the darkroom, burying himself in his work behind a

Warning! When red light is on, please do not enter dark room sign. Nancy gets no such opportunity. It's days like these that make her contemplate the pros and cons of abandoning journalism altogether and just joining a cult or something. She's dead tired, she's walking funny in the shoes that are starting to chafe, and her scalp feels greasy with oil that he tries to convince herself isn't nearly as visible as she thinks. At 9:42am, today is already a wash. She wants nothing more than to just go home and strip down and step into a piping-hot shower, and not get out for a good long time.

The coffee pot finishes percolating with a disgruntled sounding sputter, and Nancy pours herself a generous dose before getting anyone else's. They're in there guffawing about Lucy Lebrock's breasts, chowing down on the pastries that Nancy had to run and fetch from the café down the block; they can goddamn wait for their coffee.

They wouldn't even listen to her idea about a piece on Starcourt, and how it's stifling the family-run businesses of Hawkins. Bruce just poked around in the donut box and then talked right over her, griping about the absence of his favorite type of pastry.

"You think you can follow the clues and solve the case of the missing danish, Nancy Drew?"

The Post is cluttered and buzzing in that always-in-use kind of way. Pictures of Hawkins line the walls. Newspaper clippings, maps, photos, graphs and notes are pinned to cork boards. Potted plants wilt on the corners of desks; morning sunlight slots through the vertical blinds, tiger-striping the shelves full of binders, the filing cabinets, the rotating fans that rattle as they stir up the dusty air. The click-and-clatter of typewriters is a constant background noise.

She likes this. This - the office, the atmosphere, the feeling of getting to the bottom of what's happening and getting word out to the people. This is what she wants to do. Or, more specifically, that is what she wants to do. Not this. Not going on donut runs and keeping her back straight and her lips sealed when the men twirl pens between their fingers and discuss the beauty pageant at the fair with a mean shine in their eyes. When she applied for this internship she had grand, childish ideas of trench coats, pocket notebooks, crime

scene tape, an official badge. Nancy Wheeler, Hawkins Post. Can you tell me exactly what happened here?

The phone rings. Sudden and shrill, and she nearly burns the back of her hand trying to shove the coffee pot back on its plate before striding across the room to answer it. She catches it on the third ring.

"Hawkins Post."

The voice that answers is faint, creaky - an old woman's voice, sweet and plodding. It's so soft that Nancy almost doesn't catch what she says at first. And then a few of the words register, and Nancy freezes in place. Her pulse gives a hard throb right in the center of her chest.

Intuition, in the past, has served her well. It's saved her life, a time or two. It helped her take down Hawkins National Laboratory. And now, as she strains to make out the gentle, grating tones on the other end of the line, it's whispering, listen up. This is important.

"Um, hold on - I'm sorry, can you..." She scrabbles for a pen and a pad of paper. "Can you repeat that?"

Doris Driscoll, she scratches onto the paper as the woman starts over, 4819 Cornwallis Rd. And underneath, her hand moving so fast it's near-illegible, Disease. Rats.

She rips the paper from the notepad as soon as the words are down, glancing around the office furtively for a moment as Mrs. Driscoll voices her concerns. Hoping against hope that nobody walks in and asks about the call. Gloria, the secretary, is in the restroom; everyone else is in the back end of the building, barricaded comfortably away behind their desks, probably playing with their desk toys and debating sports or something.

Excellent. She doesn't need anybody butting in to steal her story.

She thanks Mrs. Driscoll, sets the phone gingerly down on the hook - and then practically lunges across the room, through the hallway, and bursts through the darkroom door with a cry of, "Jonathan!"

"No, no, no, no!" is his response, hands fluttering over the photos that she just exposed to the light. "Nancy!"

"Sorry - we have to go."

"What?"

"We have to go, come on. No, no, bring your camera - bring the camera."

"What are we -" He backtracks for the camera, slinging it around his neck. "What?"

She grabs him by the hand, pulling him along, buoyed by an enthusiasm she hasn't felt in weeks. She can make an excuse to Tom - this is worth playing the girl problems card. And if they can get the story - if it's good -

"I have a lead."

Will

Trauma has a weird effect on your fight-or-flight system. Will can watch through an entire grotesque horror movie without blinking an eye, on some days - and on others, the toaster goes off and his soul leaves his body.

Jonathan flew out the door with his shirt half-tucked-in and a lipstick stain on his cheek, which their mom rubbed off with her thumb as he tried to wriggle free, saying, "All right, all right - I gotta run, see you later." Joyce retreated with her hands raised in surrender, and she and Will cast each other a conspiratorial glance as Jonathan hauled ass out of the house.

Jonathan and Nancy think they're sneaky. Think being the operative word. The walls of this house are not as thick as they apparently assume.

"Gross," had been Will's comment. And that's what opened up the complaint floodgates. Because the lipstick on Jonathan's cheek reminded Will far too much of another couple, and that conspiratorial glance thawed the iciness between him and his mother somewhat - at least, enough that he's been complaining to her for the past few minutes about a certain best friend and his girlfriend. He's

on a roll now, right in the middle of his rant, and Joyce pokes at her plate of eggs as he talks.

He fishes his toast out of the toaster with his fingertips, jerking back a time or two and shaking his burnt fingers. "It's like they never actually hang out with us," he goes on, tossing his toast onto a plate and digging around in the jam jar with a butter knife. The glob of jam evades his efforts and he flips the whole jar upside down with an impatient grunt, scraping out the remnants onto his toast. "I mean - they're there, but it's like the whole time they're just hanging out with each other, in proximity to the rest of us. Like they barely even care about the Party anymore."

"They care," his mom interjects from the table, swirling the dregs of her coffee. "I'm sure they care."

"Yeah, but..." A lopsided shrug. "I dunno. Do they have to be sucking face all the time?"

"Maybe when you fall in love you'll understand," she offers lightly, and Will sets the empty jam jar in the sink with a too-careful precision.

"I'm not gonna... fall in love."

It sounds stiff, even to his own ears, but she drops the subject with a skeptical shrug and an, "Okay."

He's not going to.

It's not technically a lie. You can't do something that's already occurred; what's done can't be undone.

Just because he's accepted it doesn't mean he has to like it.

It's been nearly two years since he first realized - really, truly realized it. And even then he rejected it, shoved it down in a compact, sharp-edged little cube somewhere at the pit of his diaphragm. Tried to forget about it. It took another year for him to revisit that little ingot of recognition, let it out of its steel-cable bindings, acknowledge its existence.

It was awful. Ugly. It hurt. But once he admitted it to himself, he couldn't go back; he couldn't forget again, as much as he wanted to. Something just wouldn't let him tuck it away again, quiet and solitary, forgotten in the simpler, happier times of childhood. Something about what Reagan has been saying on TV. About the slurs graffitied on bridges and carved into the paint in bathroom stalls. About how people whisper about sickness, how everyone is scared of AIDS, how Will's father says it's a gay men's disease, how queer is an insult thrown at enemies in school hallways, how people like him are never in movies. Ever. They never get the guy, they never get kissed while romantic music swells in the soundtrack, they never beat the bad guys, they never save the day, they never fall in love with someone who loves them back, they never win, they never live happily ever after.

Game. Set. Match.

"Hey," his mom says, the scrape of her chair preceding her. "What happened here?"

"I dunno," Will says again as she pads past him to scoop something up off the floor. His stomach clenches when he sees what it is.

There's been a silent, ongoing battle in the Byers' kitchen these past few weeks. Somewhere, somehow, his mom found the picture of Bob that he drew last year. Bob Newby, Superhero, with his Superman pose and his red cape. That one. She dug it out from wherever it had gone - wherever Will had hidden it - and stuck it right up on the fridge for all to see. The first time he walked in and saw it staring him in the face, his throat closed up so abruptly he felt like he couldn't breathe. With trembling fingers, he slid the drawing around to the side of the fridge, where it wouldn't be so visible. The next day, it was back, front and center. He moved it again. Several days passed. Guess what?

He's never brought it up, and she hasn't either. But every time it happens, it brings the tension simmering back, frigid and stomach-twisting. The thing is, it's not like he can really mention it. How can he? He knows all too well that she's still grieving.

She misses him. Will hears her crying, sometimes, at night when he

can't sleep and she thinks no one else is awake. She sits on the side of the couch and watches those dumb comedy shows that Bob used to like. And Will hates it, he pulls his pillow over his ears when she cries because it's one of the worst sounds on Earth, but...

But it's his fault. And he can't forget that. At the end of the day, if it weren't for Will, Bob would be alive. And the last thing he needs is that stupid picture up on the fridge, reminding him.

Now, as his mother crouches by the fridge in a small scattering of alphabet magnets, he averts his eyes from the paper in her hand. Her reproachful glance still registers loud and clear.

"That was a little unnecessary," she grumbles, and magnets start clack clack clacking as she slaps them back up onto the fridge.

"What?"

The paper wobbles audibly in her hand as she waves it. In Will's peripheral vision, it's like a beacon, bright and accusatory. "You didn't have to throw him on the floor."

He looks, finally, as she stands and hovers in front of the fridge. For a moment neither one of them speaks as her hand wavers back and forth. Will she put it on the front of the fridge, right in front of him, or to the side? Neither - she sets the picture down on the counter with an irritated little tut, and Will lifts his hands in a sharp I'm innocent gesture.

"I didn't do that, it probably just fell."

"On its own?"

"Somebody probably just brushed past it, Mom, it's fine," he snaps, and then sighs and bites down on his toast to keep himself from saying anything else. The sharp, somewhat burnt edge of the crust stabs the roof of his mouth.

Neither of them have forgotten yesterday's argument, either, and it hangs over their heads as the silence stretches on. At last Will swallows his bite and awkwardly broaches the subject he's been sitting on since before Jonathan left. The thing he worked on nearly

all night, since he couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes he saw spores.

"Hey, so. When do you work today?"

"Not 'till 11:00." Curiosity softens her scowl. "Why?"

"Well, you said we should spend more time together -" Her eyes light up before he's even through with his sentence. "- and there's something you might be able to help me with. You don't know where that old walking stick went, do you?"

Mike

Dark clouds are pulling in on broad, gritty gusts of wind. The red, white and blue bunting flags flutter fitfully over each window of the Wheeler house as, above, the treetops ripple and lash and thunder grinds between the clouds. Out front, Mike's dad is marching nervously back and forth across the grass behind his lawnmower. A yellow slicker flaps around his frame, paired ridiculously with beige cargo shorts. Ted Wheeler never was a particular bastion of high fashion.

Mike just hopes he can get to Hop's cabin before it starts raining.

He's just digging into the clean laundry basket for his own raincoat - it's gotta be here somewhere - when a familiar five-beat knock sounds out at the basement back door. Lucas.

"Hey, what's up?" is Mike's distracted greeting as his friend lets himself in. A bubble of cool, damp air comes in with him, momentarily stirring up the yellow curtains.

"Sup," Lucas says, and flops onto the couch. He's in a baseball cap and a tank top, and goosebumps dot his arms from the relative chill of the storm front. Mike bats at the bill of his hat as he passes.

"Don't get too comfortable, I gotta motor in like two minutes."

Lucas fixes his hat with one hand and takes a swipe at Mike with the other. "Where are you going? Will said to meet here."

"Huh?"

"On the radio?" He gives Mike an are you stupid? look, and Mike lets out an irritable huff of breath. Where the heck is this thing? Did he leave it upstairs? Did he leave it at the cabin? He's starting to think he may have left it at the cabin.

Caught up in his thoughts, Mike is a beat too late to say, "Wait, why?"

"Don't look at me, I figured you'd know."

"I can't hang out today, I'm supposed to go visit El. Actually, I was supposed to go visit El like half an hour ago, so - ha!"

He dives, coming up with the green coat fisted in one hand. It was halfway underneath the rocking armchair, for some reason. Holly might have hidden it. She does that, sometimes, if she doesn't want Mike to leave. Little menace.

The slight rattle of the doorknob gives them about half a second's warning before, in a rolling billow of cool, storm-charged air, Will appears. His cape - yes, cape - ripples around his shoulders in the sporadic bursts of wind; his hair flutters over his forehead, underneath the hat. The end of his staff thumps on the carpet as he strides in, and thunder echoes, distant and deep, as he pushes the door shut behind him.

Royal purple, floor-length, and spangled with shiny-silver stars, the robe is complete with a shoulder cape and a tall, pointy cone hat. Silver embroidery lines the hems and cuffs. A cassette player and a notebook are tucked under Will's left arm.

Mike recognizes the costume. Of course he does. It's from over a year ago, when the Party dressed up for the Lute of Olaf Orcsbane campaign that Mike put together for Spring Break. Even then, Will was a little less than enthused to be wearing it; it's not exactly authentic, but it was the best Joyce could afford on short notice. Now it's creased and wrinkled, clearly having spent that last fifteen months in a storage box or a closet, only to be unearthed today - for reasons unknown - but it doesn't swallow Will's frame quite as completely as it did last Spring. It actually looks like it fits him, now. The collar of

his shirt - red, blue and gray stripes, like a subdued American flag - is peeking out from the wider collar of the deep purple robe, and for a moment Mike wonders if he pulled on the costume just now or if he rode across town in it. Just a wizard casually biking his way through the suburbs, nothing to see here.

"Thank you for meeting me here," Will says, formally - strained, almost, like he's delivering lines in the midst of stage fright. "We have work to do." Then he looks around, speaking normally for a moment. "Where's Dustin?"

"What are you doing?" is Lucas's answer, as Will sets the cassette player on the table with a flourish, drags the cord over to an outlet, and thumbs the play button.

Piping, elven-sounding music bursts from the speakers, like a Renaissance Faire spontaneously manifesting in the Wheelers' basement.

"Uh, Will?" Mike says, bemused.

Will straightens, his fingers fluttering for a moment as he adjusts his grip on the wooden walking stick that he's using as a wizard's staff. "Please address me by my full name," he says, once again adopting that stiff, practiced voice.

Bamboozled is a word that El learned a few weeks ago. Bamboozle: to confound or perplex.

Mike gapes at his best friend, and all he can think to say is, "What?"

The staff bangs on the carpet, once, and Will's voice rises into a theatrical near-shout as he asserts, "My full name!"

There's a high, pink blush coloring the tips of Will's cheekbones, and a glimmer of embarrassment shows through when he shifts his weight, shoulders drawing up tensely. Mike meets his self-conscious gaze, and he can't help it; he smiles. He has absolutely no idea what Will is getting at, but, sure. He'll bite.

"Okay," he concedes, "Will the Wise. Could you turn down the music a little?"

"That is not music," Will says, being Will the Wise again. He seems a little more confident in the role now that Mike has started to play along. "That is the sound of destiny."

He's trying to look very serious, but he cracks after about two seconds, a sheepish smile taking over his face, and his eyes drop. When he looks back up, Lucas speaks up from the couch.

"What is happening right now?"

Mike sighs, his weight ricocheting from foot to foot as he glances towards the door. It's getting darker outside. If he doesn't head out soon he's gonna get caught in the storm, he just knows it. He hefts the raincoat, getting ready to slip it over one arm. "Look, Will, I - Will the Wise. I can't, today. I said I'd hang out with El."

"C'mon," Will says, dropping out of character to take a step closer. His bangs are pinched under the brim of the goofy cone-hat, which almost falls off his head as he looks up slightly to fix Mike with the puppy-dog eyes that have been his secret weapon since kindergarten. "You've been hanging out with her every day for the past two weeks. Can't you take one day?"

"Not every day," Mike counters, but as he thinks back, he's not actually sure if that's true or not. Then a stronger argument occurs to him. "Besides, I haven't even planned a campaign yet. I -" He sighs again, shaking his head. "I have nothing. I'm sorry. Like I said, I'll do it this -"

"Well, that's all right, I planned one."

Mike stops short. His eyes are drawn to the tattered spiral notebook on top of the cassette player, which he knows is full of countless sketches - and, apparently, one Dungeons and Dragons campaign.

Will has never made a campaign before. At least, not fully, not all on his own. He's collaborated with Mike, of course, bouncing ideas back and forth and acting as sounding boards for each other as they sketch and write, respectively. But he's never written a whole campaign.

"You did?"

"You did?" Lucas echoes, and Will nods at them, one after the other.

"Yeah." He shrugs, scratches his nose. "I just figured - you know, I figured you didn't have time to make one, but I did, so..."

The meandering, upbeat notes of the fantasy music fill the silence. Mike looks at Lucas. Lucas looks at Mike. They both look at Will.

The truth is, he's not super in the mood for D&D. Sitting in his basement all day was not what he had in mind for his 3rd of July. He's supposed to be out doing things, going places, seeing his girlfriend. He's just not in the right headspace to be sitting around a table, staring at a board, pretending they're fighting dragons and fording enchanted rivers. Not to mention that his real-life damsel, not so much in distress, is probably sitting by her window right this moment, waiting for him.

But Will did make a whole campaign.

Mike must be making some sort of face, because Will is already smiling hopefully. And when he tosses down his raincoat onto the couch, the smile breaks into a bright grin.

El

They had another fight last night.

It was about the cabin. It's always about the cabin.

She was late for curfew - really late. That's what Hop does know. That's why he was mad. What he doesn't know is that she broke another Party rule while she was at it: she lied. She didn't tell him about the movie, only that she lost track of time with the Party and didn't really notice that the sun had gone down. If you want to be technical about it, that part isn't wrong. It's just, she didn't notice the time passing because she was in a movie theater, with its rows and rows of ruby-red, velvety seats, and its matching red curtains, and the TV screen that must have been as big as an entire building. She bent the truth a little, as Mike would say - she told part of the truth, but not all, and that's a kind of lie too. A lie of omission.

She feels bad. The kind of bad where guilt gets all thick and heavy and aching in your stomach, like you've eaten an entire bucket of candy all at once, and the wrong thing you did won't quit tugging at you no matter how hard you try not to think about it. But what else could she do? He was already mad enough, worried enough about her just from being so late. So, she kept her mouth shut about the movie, and they fought about the cabin instead. About Mike coming over to the cabin; about her leaving it. Mike isn't supposed to be over so often, apparently, but El is also not supposed to be out so much. They're supposed to wait another six months before she can come out and be a normal girl. Another six months.

El kicks at a pebble, misses it, and sends it shooting off down the street with a jerk of her head. If she's not supposed to be around town, and Mike isn't supposed to come over, then how are they supposed to see each other?

"It is important to me that you feel safe." That's what Hop said. And she does feel safe at the cabin. She also feels bored. And trapped. And stir-crazy. That's a word Will taught her a few months ago. Stir-crazy. It's where you can't keep still and you want to move, you want to leave and be anywhere but here.

El is stir-crazy.

Which is why, currently, she's pacing down the cracked and uneven sidewalk squares of Old Cherry Road, her ratty sneakers scuffing along the concrete. Half a block down the tree-lined street, in front of a small white house, is a red-haired girl practicing a hopping kind of kick with her skateboard. Flecks of rain hit the concrete, but the full storm hasn't reached this part of town yet. Her hair and shoulders are a little damp from walking in the drizzle, but she doesn't mind. It helps with the heat.

Mike was supposed to come over today, after Hop went to work. He was supposed to be at the cabin nearly an hour ago, and there was no sign of him - not even a quick radio call, as he's done before, sometimes. Hey, sorry, my mom won't let me leave the house tonight, or, Hey, I got sick, I'll be at home eating jello for a few days. She got worried. So, she broke yet another rule: she went to check on him, in the Void.

And, guess what? He wasn't sick. He wasn't hurt. He hadn't been plucked up off the streets by the Bad Men. He wasn't getting yelled at by Hop. He was in his basement, safe and sound, sitting around the table with Will and Lucas. Will was wearing special-occasion clothes; the other two were dressed normally. They were playing a game.

The scene was familiar, in a stomach-sinking kind of way. Last year, before the Gate, El used to go check on the Party a lot. Daily, almost. It wasn't uncommon that she'd find them sitting around that table, playing that game, the way they were just now. It's just that, now she's not a secret anymore; she's supposed to be part of the Party again. They're supposed to invite her to things like that. And moreover, Mike isn't supposed to ignore her.

Max is so focused on her task that she doesn't look up at El's approach, doesn't even notice her until the skateboard shoots out from under her feet - not El's doing, this time - and streaks down the street. El's foot comes down on the end of the board just as it's about to strike her ankle, and it flips up, nearly hitting her in the leg before she catches it. It's solid, heavier than she expected, and she holds it in both hands as she goes to Max.

"Hi."

Max's eyebrows squiggle up in confusion. "Hi?" She accepts the board, and El scuffs her palms along the sides of the too-hot plaid shirt that falls nearly to her knees.

Max is pretty. El has thought that since the first time she saw her, through the narrow rectangular window of the gym door. Not the way that Nancy is pretty, or the way that women on TV are pretty, but a different kind. With her long, bright hair - red-orange like the best kind of autumn leaves - and her round cheeks and gray-blue eyes. Sailing around Mike on her board, arms outstretched for balance. She was pretty, and El hated her. She was supposed to be the fifth member of the Party - El, not this new girl that could glide across solid ground like she was flying.

She doesn't hate Max anymore. It took her a few months to warm up to her, as Dustin put it - especially since their contact was so limited, with El so often hidden away in the cabin. But Max is part of the

Party, and so is El, and that's that. Friends.

It's just, they don't usually hang out alone - never, actually. Which is probably why Max looks so bamboozled when El says, "Can we talk?"

Will

Will isn't nearly as good at DMing as Mike is.

In fact, he feels like he's largely failing.

Will doesn't have Mike's dramatic flair, Mike's energy. He's a little more timid about acting out the campaign the way Mike does; he can't quite bring himself to playact the dialogue, the sound effects, the descriptions. But he has his plan, the notes scratched out in bullet points and diagrams in the back of his sketchbook, and he has Mike's Dungeon Master Manual, and he has the DM screen up in front of him on the table, and he's doing the best he can. He's written some stories before - well, drawn, in comic form - and in some ways, this isn't so different. And as the minutes go by and he settles in a little, he starts feeling a bit more confident. He can't hold a candle to Mike's storytelling, but he has a good imagination, and he delivers the campaign with determination, his dry humor and creativity making up for his lack of loud drama - or at least, that's what he tells himself to dispel the remaining nerves.

"Can I do a perception check to see if there's anything else in the room?" Mike says. He's sitting back in his chair, one foot propped up on a crossbeam under the table, and his pencil flips between his fingers. He's been nicely playing along, but without much enthusiasm.

"Roll."

The die clatters. Crit fail. Lucas grimaces.

"It's a room," Will reports, and the corner of Mike's mouth twists up as he snorts.

"Guys, I think I figured it out," Mike says in a goofy voice, "We're in a room!"

"No," Lucas gasps sarcastically, and it sets off a smattering of giggles from all three of them. And that seems to be the tipping point. Because once they've started laughing, the smile remains on Mike's face, and it gets easier and easier to dissolve into laughter as time goes by and they're caught up in the social momentum of being ridiculous with your best friends.

Side A of the cassette runs out, the music falling silent with a hiss of white noise and a click, just as they're getting into the belly of the cave. Will consults his rough sketch of the scene he planned.

"It kind of skitters sideways up the wall, a little like Thing from the Addams family and a lot like something you wouldn't want to touch with a ten-foot pole."

Mike sits forward in his chair, a spark of interest lighting up in his dark eyes as he reaches out to jostle Lucas. "Ooh, wait, is this the thing the villagers were complaining about?"

"Uh, yeah, because something the size of a hand could destroy a whole tower, Mike."

Will goes on, "It opens its mouth and - oh, I don't know. Mike, make a noise. What noise does it make?"

Mike unleashes an ungodly screech that leaves Lucas collapsing onto the table with helpless, heaving laughter.

"Beautiful," Will laughs, a hand jerking up to catch his hat as it almost falls off his head yet again. Rain is plinking against the side of the house, audible now that the music has gone silent, but inside it's dry and cozy and familiar. And for the first time today - maybe the first time this whole summer - Will feels almost like things are back to how they're supposed to be.

Almost. Dustin's conspicuous absence casts a shadow over the otherwise merry atmosphere, as does the fog of vague disinterest that hangs about Mike and Lucas's expressions. But that's all but gone, now, and all at once Mike opens his mouth and -

"Well, my friends, it seems strange things are afoot. Have at thee, tiny

cave demon!"

Ah, Will thinks, fondly, as Mike gets into character with an easy grin, There he is. There's Elric Maelgrim the Just, Flamecaster, Guardian of the Bridge. And just like that, Will's inner Cleric is alive and kicking, rising easily to the surface at the glimmer of his best friend. Will the Wise and Elric the Just, side-by-side once again, at last.

Jim

She's in the window when he pulls up out front.

She's perched on a stepping stool, on her toes, balancing as she pins up the banner that reads, SALE! Discounts 50-70% off! Through the ghostly reflections of the town in the window, he can just make out her figure. The curve of her torso, still slender despite the years that have passed. The fringe of her hair flowing over her shoulders in messy waves. The jeans that don't exactly do her a disservice. She catches sight of him through the window as he gets out of the car, and he returns the little wave she sends his way.

Downtown Hawkins is in a touch of trouble. It's the mall, see - Starcourt. It's eating up so much of the business that there's hardly a customer to be seen in any of the shops in town. At first everyone said things would calm down, given some time. Folks would tire of the novelty of the mall and everything would go back to normal. But it's been months, and store owners are way past antsy, past nervous, and getting near panicky. There's a town hall meeting planned for next Tuesday at 6pm, and as Chief of Police, Jim will have to attend.

It's rotten business. All of it. Of course they're right - the mall is killing the small businesses. Such is the nature of this grand, godforsaken country. The worst part is, there's not a damn thing anyone can do about it. Starcourt is too entrenched in the town, now. The mayor and his well-to-do posse like it; they like the money it brings in. They like that it makes Hawkins look more with-the-times than it really is. From the second Mayor Kline cut the ribbon at the mall's grand opening, Hawkins' fate was sealed. Nothing short of a miracle or the apocalypse could take down Starcourt.

It's shitty all the way 'round, but it's life. And his job isn't to keep mom and pop shops open, his job is to keep people safe. Unless the mall grows teeth and starts eating people, there's nothing he can do.

He expects this to be the topic of conversation inside Melvald's - Joyce has been preoccupied and glum, these past few weeks, worried about losing her job like so many others. Instead, from the moment he walks inside, she's going on about Will - not that that's a surprise. Will is a frequent subject of discussion, when it comes to Joyce, and Jim can relate. He has El, after all.

El, who is the reason he's here right now. And once Joyce has talked herself in circles about her youngest for a little while, it's Jim's turn.

"10:32pm," he reiterates, when it seems like Joyce isn't quite grasping the immensity of his frustrations. "That's not just late, that's - that's deliberate. How do you accidentally miss curfew by two and a half hours? And you know what she did? You know what?"

Joyce quirks an eyebrow, infuriatingly aloof. As the mother of two teenagers, she has a tendency of regarding his parental woes with some amusement. He, on the other hand, doesn't find it nearly as funny.

"She slammed the door. Right in my face. She hasn't done that since -" He skims a hand through the air, estimating a timeline. "Since last winter."

"Teenagers," Joyce tuts.

"It's not just that," he protests - although, it's that too. He's never had a teenage daughter before. Sarah... Well, Sarah never quite made it that far. "It's Mike. It's them. They're together all the time."

"Will was home late, too," she murmurs, still rolling price stickers onto packages of hair clips and hanging them up on their display.

But Jim is on a roll, a rant developing as he stands up from the shelf he's been crouched on. "I need for them to break up, or I am gonna lose it. I mean, I am just gonna lose it, Joyce."

She points a finger at him as she goes around the corner of the aisle.

"That is not your decision."

"They're spending entirely too much time together. You agree with me about that, right?"

"Well, I mean, they're just kissing, right?"

"Yeah, but it is constant. It is -" He breaks off with a grumble, scrubbing the pads of his fingers over his eyes. He's going in circles. And then, as he paces around the corner to catch up with her, his brain catches on the piece of information he missed in his tirade. "You said Will was back late?"

She sighs, her cheeks puffing out, and nods. "Around the same time, yeah. 10:30."

Her shoe strikes something and her hair falls over her face as she looks down at the plastic magnet that she just sent rattling across the aisle. A small jumble of them are scattered on the shiny tiles of the floor - cheesy fridge magnets in the shapes of bananas and carrots and apples. She kneels and begins scooping them up into a little pile. When she speaks again, her voice is different. Lower, tighter.

"Hop."

He goes to squat next to her, his ears pricking at the tone. She's been preoccupied since he walked in. He figured it was just work-stress, worrying over the fate of her job, but now there's something more urgent in her eyes when she finally looks at him.

"You're gonna think I'm crazy." She sticks a smiling plastic slice of pie onto the display board, only for it to fall right back to the floor. The same thing happens to the Hawkins 30th Annual Book Fair! magnet. She frowns over them for a moment, then shoves them aside with a mutter of, "Cheap junk."

"Joyce," he says seriously, as she slides to the floor to lean against the opposite shelf. "I know you're crazy."

Normally this would earn him a playful scoff and a light kick, but she just hugs herself and looks towards the front of the store. Aside from her Pinto and his Blazer, the parking spaces are empty. Rain taps on

the front windows and runs down the glass in rivulets, leaving strange, warped shadows on the ground, but it's still stiflingly hot. The AC unit has been straining and chugging since he walked in, completely unqualified for the task of keeping up with this record-breaking season. Jim settles onto the floor across from her, their legs stretching out side-by-side across the aisle like a dam across a stream. She still has one of the magnets in one hand, and she fusses with it as she works up to whatever it is she's going to say. He waits.

"You'll think I'm crazy," she says again, a shallow inhale lifting her sternum under the blue Melvald's shirt. She chews on it for a few more moments before finally spitting it out. "But I think the lab... I think something is wrong."

"The lab?" His eyebrows lift in genuine surprise. Out of everything she could have said, that was not what he expected. "The lab what?"

She's still staring out at the front windows, tension hardening the planes of her face. She shrugs. "I don't know. I just - something is weird. Don't you feel like something is weird?"

Like a stuck record, he says, "The lab?"

She's moving all at once, scooting forward to get closer to him, hugging her knees to her chest with one arm like a kid as she gesticulates with the other. The soft uncertainty in her voice has dried up completely, leaving something far more familiar. Determination. "Last night - no, listen. Last night, I was waiting for Will, and I -" She struggles, face twisting up as she searches for words. "It was like I -" Her fingers snap. "The power went out! Remember?"

"The blackout, yeah." It affected the entirety of Hawkins. Goddamn new power company can't do their jobs for shit. He had to use his flashlight to move around for a couple minutes, until the power came back up.

"The power went out, and it was like I could just feel it. Like how it felt in that place, remember?"

He knows she means the Upside Down, and just like that it starts to

make sense. The blackout, the lights flickering and dying, the darkness.

"Joyce."

"No. I know what you're thinking, and that's not it. It's not just me, it... We've been having all these power fluctuations, and now the blackout, and I've been having dreams -" She cuts off and rubs her lips together like they're dry, resting her chin on her knees for a moment.

"You've been having nightmares?" The again is on the tip of his tongue, but he doesn't say it. She glares at him, ready to defend herself, but he shakes his head and switches tracks. "Joyce, I've been watching that place like a hawk. Okay? If anyone was going in or out of there, I would know. It's been quiet, I promise you."

It is important to me that you feel safe. Those are the words that almost came out of his mouth - most likely because they're still fresh in his mind from when he said them last night, to his daughter. But saying them to Joyce is a little different - a little harder. It suggests things that he's not quite willing, or ready, to say aloud. So, instead, he says, "I want you to feel like you still have a home here."

Her eyes flicker to his, guilty, and her feet shuffle on the somewhat grimy tiles.

A week ago, he entered the Byers house to find several pamphlets and business cards for real estate agents and moving companies on the kitchen table. She hid them away under a pile of mail before either of the boys got home, but Jim saw it - and she knows he did. It's nothing official - yet. She's just poking around, looking at some options, thinking things over. That's how she brushed it aside when he asked.

She considers this. Straightens her hunched shoulders. And shakes her head. "Something's wrong. I can feel it." She presses a fist to her chest, eyes hard. "I know it."

Jim would like to say that he's learned a lot in the past two years. Things about Hawkins; things about the government; things about

other dimensions and monsters and survival, things he never would have dreamed existed in a million years. And one of the most important things he learned, through all that: Joyce Byers' instinct is not something to be taken lightly.

He doubted her once. And he was wrong.

"Okay," he says, and her face twitches in surprise. "So, we go check it out."

"What?"

"The lab. We go check it out." She blinks at him, and he says, "If it's nothing, it's nothing. And you can have some peace of mind."

"But... if it's not?"

"Then we can be glad you spoke up. When do you get off today?"

El

She should not be here, but she lets Max lead her by the hand anyway. Off the bus, through a crushing crowd and a steady, cool drum of rain, towards the front doors of the big, angular tan building.

It was because El told Max about Mike. About how he ignored her in favor of playing D-and-D with the rest of the Party, and they never even invited her. About how she felt so trapped and suffocated in the cabin.

"That sucks," had been Max's response. And then, after a moment of silence, "Well, do you wanna hang out? I mean, with me? I was thinking about getting ice cream. I'll get you some from Scoops if you want."

"What about Mike?"

"What about him? There's more to life than stupid boys. C'mon, it'll be fun."

She didn't agree right away. She chewed on her lip, looked down at

her lap. "I can't... I'm not supposed to be in public."

"Okay but... says who? Seriously, El, it can't be healthy to be cooped up in that musty old cabin twenty-four-seven. And plus, it's a shopping mall. It's not like there are government agents staked out in J.C. Penney waiting for you to show up. And nobody would even recognize you if they did see you, anyway. You look totally different now."

And so here they are.

Last night, El barely got a glimpse of the mall before they hurdled into Scoops, out of breath, ready to sneak into the movie theater. Now, she's smack-dab in the middle of it. It's blinding. Buzzing. Overwhelming. She doesn't know where to look; every direction is so full of color and movement and light that it hurts her eyes. Voices and music. Little kids shrieking, adults chattering, teenagers yelling and laughing. Pink and blue fluorescent tubes winding around the lip of the upper level, which hangs out over the main court. Sun glaring off of the glass roof far above. Lights studding the ceiling like diamonds - dark green leafy plants everywhere, like a forest brought inside and contained to neatly organized pots. It smells like shiny-new-plastic-paint, and perfume, and sweat, and like all the best foods in the world. Pretzels, popcorn, ice cream, hot dogs, candy.

"So, what do you wanna do first?" Max laughs when El doesn't respond, too busy staring around with parted lips. "You've never been shopping before, have you?"

El shakes her head wordlessly, inching closer to her friend, feeling exposed and stared-at in the bustling midst of the crowd. It's hard for her to talk, sometimes, when she's around a lot of people, and she can feel herself clamming up.

Max shrugs. "Well, then I guess we're just gonna have to try everything."

But El has to go sit down on a bench for a couple minutes, curling up and half-hiding her face behind her knees, adjusting to the volume and the crowd. Max sits beside her on the edge of the bench, fingers wringing together, reaching out once or twice only to change her

mind and withdraw her hand before it makes contact.

When she feels better, El lowers her shoes to the glossy-shiny floor and decides, "Clothes."

It's the only thing about shopping she really knows. People on TV go clothes shopping sometimes. And, once in a blue moon, Hop will bring home a big pile of clothes from the thrift store and she has to try on each and every single one, to see what fits. El feels like she knows how to go shopping for clothes.

So, first it's the shiny red store with white letters that spell, the gap. And she was wrong - she has no idea how to go shopping for clothes. Because here, apparently, you don't just try on whatever there is until you find something that isn't too big or too small. Here, there are all sizes of everything. She darts between the shelves and racks of shirts and pants and dresses, hats and scarves, all different colors and patterns, with Max drifting along in her erratic wake. In the middle of the store, surrounded by a rainbow of soft fabrics, El turns to her friend.

"What do I choose?"

"Oh, uh." Max blows out her cheeks and sticks her hands in the pockets of her shorts. "I don't really do a lot of fashion. I guess, just... Choose what you like, okay? Whatever makes you feel like you."

"Like me?"

"Yeah." Max is looking at her with a strange expression - something a little sad, maybe. It's gone in the next second as she looks around at the candy-colored displays. "Not eleven. Not Hopper's daughter. Not Mike's girlfriend. Just you."

"But how do I know what's me?"

Max follows El's line of sight to the aqua-blue, flowy shirt being modeled by an expressionless life-sized doll. El smiles. The sprinkling of shiny silver squiggles remind her a little bit of Will's special-occasion clothes in the Void.

Max steps forward and takes one of the blue shirts from the pile

below, holding it out to El. "You try things on."

And they do. Well, El does. Max, not so much, except for a hat or two. But El could do this for hours. She tries the loose-fitting blue shirt - a blouse, apparently - and she tries a flat yellow hat that looks like a pancake, and red-striped seatbelts that hold your pants up if your belt isn't up to snuff. She tries a white button-up shirt with matching pants and a mustard-yellow belt as wide as her palm and then some. Max tries on sunglasses while El discovers something labelled romper. It's black, with bursts and swirls of color from collar-to-hem, and El very nearly declares, this one.

That is, until her eye catches on the yellow shirt.

Red next to black is a friend of Jack, she remembers, lifting the shirt from its pile, but red next to yellow could kill a fellow. But what about yellow and black?

It's soft, bright yellow, snaked all over by meandering geometric patterns of black.

She nudges Max, holding up the shirt. "Can we find some pants seatbelts for this?"

Max blinks at her for a few seconds before her chin dimples with a repressed snort of laughter. "You mean suspenders?"

They were nearly caught sneaking El's outfit out of the store. Max has a little allowance money, but she wants to save it for ice cream - and besides, she didn't have enough for the shirt, suspenders, and the pair of loose, sturdy black pants that El chose to go with it. Oh, and the red-white-yellow metallic belt, but that technically came with the pants. She's not supposed to use her powers in public, but the cashier would have seen them if she hadn't distracted him at the last second. While he lunged to catch the falling display of frilly scarves, they made their escape, El's new outfit rolled up and stuffed under her overlarge flannel shirt.

It's only the one outfit, and it's not like they're stealing from people - really, they're stealing from a big company, like Max said. Companies

have so much money, they won't even notice that one little outfit is gone. It won't hurt anyone just this once. Max snags a plastic shopping bag out of a trash can to carry the clothes in, and they head for the upper level.

They do pay for their photos at the Flash Studio, though, where the friendly man behind the camera demonstrates poses for them and tells them that they're gorgeous and stunning. El even convinces Max to put on a few of the props - a feather boa that's probably the softest, fluffiest thing El has ever touched; some big pearl earrings that clip on, pinching their earlobes; lacy gloves and big, crinkly bows on headbands. Max doesn't like the props as much as El does, but she begrudgingly lets El drag her through the poses, and by the end they're both laughing and out of breath.

They run between stores. Window shopping, Max says. Where you look at everything but don't actually buy anything. Exercise mats, lipstick, records, shoes, TVs, toys, perfume, jewelry. There's even a car - a whole car, inside the building. There's a drawing to win it - a sort of game of luck, like tossing dice. They're too young to win, though - and besides, El can't be going around writing her name down on things, announcing her existence.

By the time they reach Scoops Ahoy, their pictures tucked away in the shopping bag next to El's outfit, El is shaky and sweaty and frazzled in the best way. Her fingers are hot and trembling, her cheeks sore from smiling so much, and her head rings with the noise of the mall. But it's quieter in here, where the air is colder than the rest of the mall, and only a few people are sitting around tables eating ice cream. A song about blue jeans is playing over the speakers.

Steve is here, arguing about something with the freckled, sarcastic girl behind the counter. El smiles at him. She doesn't know Steve very well, but she likes him okay. He was there on the night of the Gate. He helped the Party. Will told her about it. And a friend of Will's is a friend of hers. His eyebrow quirks up when he sees them, and he points a big spoon at El.

"Aren't you supp-?"

"One scoop of rocky road, please," Max says, loudly, and then turns to El. "What about you?"

Rows of huge, multicolored tubs of ice cream behind a frosted-over glass shield. Too many choices. Tired and overwhelmed, El lowers her face. She wants to reach out and grab Max's sleeve, like she does with Mike sometimes, but Max's sleeves are short - and besides, she might not like El doing that. Will likes hugs, and Dustin ruffles El's hair a lot, and of course there's Mike. But Max and Lucas don't do many touches.

"Anything," El says.

Max thinks. "Strawberry? Everybody likes strawberry."

She was wrong. The song isn't about blue jeans, it's about a girl named Blue Jean. A girl with a police bike and a turned-up nose.

"Strawberry," El echoes.

Max counts out her money and Steve hands two napkin-wrapped cones over the counter. El accepts hers with an excited little hop, recovering from her moment of shyness. She likes these kinds of cones. Hop brought her one, once, as a surprise. They're called waffle cones, like Eggos, and they're nice and crunchy once you've eaten the ice cream out of them.

"Mm," El hums, a little surprised at how good the first taste is.

"See?" Max says as they leave Scoops. "What'd I tell you? There's more to life than -"

Steve

"Stupid boys," El giggles as she and Max disappear around the corner.

Steve is not entirely sure that El is supposed to be at the mall. But she was here yesterday, and she's with the Mayfield kid, so it's probably fine.

Anyway, he's got bigger problems. Namely, that this is the suckiest

summer ever.

"And another one bites the dust," Robin crows as Steve's attempts at flirting drive away yet another reasonably cute college girl. "You are oh-for-six, Popeye."

She traces a bold, black line down the mini whiteboard she has appropriated and labelled for this purpose: You Rule vs You Suck. She's working upside-down to add the tick mark to the right hand column, and her blonde-ish-brown-ish bangs fall into her face as she looks up at him with a smirk.

"Yeah, yeah, I can count," Steve says, leaning against the counter to face her where she's leaning through the window of the back room.

"You know that means you suck," she reports cheerfully, and his head bobs in a nod.

"Yep, I can read, too. It's this stupid hat. I am telling you, it is totally blowing my best feature."

"Yeah, company policy is a real drag."

Robin is a cute girl. Yeah, he said it. She's cute. She's got that freckles-and-frizzy-beach-waves kind of warm attractiveness to her, mixed with a personality that's very hard to miss, even at first glance. Lined eyes, chain necklaces, BandAids on her knees, hair chopped blunt just above her shoulders. Never short of a barbed comment or witty comeback. Always chewing on her nails or a pen or a waffle cone. Front teeth just a little too big. Bracelets up and down her arms. A scrappy little nobody.

"You know, it's a crazy idea, but have you considered..." She sucks on those buck teeth, pinning him with a calculating stare. "Telling the truth?"

"Oh, you mean that I couldn't get into Tech and my douchebag dad's trying to teach me a lesson, I make three bucks an hour and I have no future? That truth?"

But her attention has shifted. She's spotted a fresh wave of free entertainment. "Hey, twelve o' clock."

Brenna Stratlin and Jennine Flemming. Both cheerleaders - or they were, before they graduated this past school year. Brenna's fiery curls bounce as she flicks them out of her eyes, and Steve spins to face his coworker again.

"Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Okay, uh... I'm going in. Okay? And you know what?" With a firm swipe and a toss, the stupid sailor hat is gone. "Screw company policy."

"Oh my God, you're a whole new man," Robin deadpans.

"Right?" Steve spins, startling Jennine. "Ahoy, ladies! Didn't see you there. Would you guys like to set sail on this ocean of flavor with me? I'll be your captain. I'm Steve Harrington."

Steve is oh-for-seven.

He sucks.

Which is why, when Dustin appears at the counter with his eyes wild, his raincoat dripping, and his curls all on end like Einstein, Steve immediately drops his ice cream scoop and calls, "I'm going on break!"

In the back, Dustin slams his armful of books down on the rickety table. He's been talking at a million miles per hour since his initial approach, and Steve can barely get a word in edgewise, let alone understand what he's saying.

"So I thought maybe it had something to do with geometry, or maybe trigonometry, because, yanno, degrees, but I'm not gonna be in trigonometry for like another two years, and anyway, it would have to be referencing something, and then what about the sun? The solar whatever? Where does that come in? So then I was thinking, degrees, sun, maybe it's about temperature. So I was checking in -"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait." Steve has been waving his hands through the air, trying to get Dustin to slow down. "Okay, first of all, maybe take a breath. Yeah? Secondly, what are you talking about?"

From his seat at the table, behind the array of library books that he's

already opened and started to cross-reference, Dustin looks up at him. "I said, I picked up some coded government chatter on Cerebro."

"You... what?"

He explains over a bowl of mint chocolate chip. The Cadillac of ham radios, set up on the hill behind Winze Street. The Party jumping ship after the movie. The late-night broadcast. The code.

"If they had been there they would have heard it for themselves," Dustin says, mashing his ice cream into a soft paste with the back of his spoon. "But they weren't, so they don't get to partake in the mystery. We get it all to ourselves."

"Lucky us." Steve turns the tape recorder over in his hands. They already listened to Dustin's recording - a short string of scientific babble that could have come from the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. "How do you know it's government?"

"Uh, who else is it gonna be?"

Dustin rolls his eyes and scoops a bite of mashed ice cream into his mouth, and Steve huffs out a silent laugh through his nose. Gotta love fourteen-year-old logic.

"What channel did you say it was?" he asks, trading the tape recorder for the radio, fiddling with the dials.

"Uh, here." Dustin leans across the table and adjusts the frequency. "Right here. But we're not gonna be able to pick it up without Cereb-"

"... new batch of IDCs awaiting transport to the Key. Over."

The female voice, rough with a smoker's rasp, is one whole big question mark - but the man that answers her is familiar. A cool, smooth alto with a touch of northeastern inflection to the syllables. The same voice that gave the code on Dustin's recording.

"Roger that. Over and out."

The channel goes quiet except for the hiccup of static, and Dustin points at the radio as if Steve could have missed it. "That! There! Did

you hear that? I told you, government. Gotta be. That's the same... huh." He leans back in his seat, frowning. His green Camp Know Where '85 hat slips down over his forehead and he pushes it back with a knuckle. "The Supercomm on its own should not be able to pick up on anything from very far away."

"So that means it's coming from here?" Robin says, making them both jump and twirl around in their seats. She's leaning so far through the partition that the frame of the window is biting visibly into her stomach, creasing her striped blue sailor shirt.

"Hey, private conversation," Steve says, twirling a finger in a signal for her to turn around and get lost, but Dustin is already saying, "I guess it must be. These radios are kind of shitty, honestly, I mean, I can barely reach Lucas's house from mine on this thing."

The radio gives a sharp squeal of feedback static and they all lock eyes on it, waiting. But no one speaks up.

At last, Steve ventures, "But... where inside the mall would that be coming from?"

Nancy

"It started last night," Mrs. Driscoll says in her soft, nasally voice. She has a deliberate, dumpy way of walking, stomping along at such a slow pace that Nancy has to walk haltingly to keep from overtaking her. Mrs. Driscoll's polka-dotted red umbrella bobs up and down with each heavy step. "Woke me up out of a dead sleep, you know. Scared the bejeesus out of me, I'll tell you. Like nothing I've ever seen before. And I have seen a lot, honey, I have seen a lot."

"And you live here alone?" Nancy's pencil scratches over her notepad. Jonathan is holding their own umbrella over both of them - a fact that Mrs. Driscoll giggled at when she first stepped outside to greet them.

"Yes. Jack, my husband, he passed away - what is it, now? Ten years ago."

"Oh, um, I'm... I'm so sorry."

Is she not being very professional? Was that insensitive? She feels like she's doing everything wrong, and she wants so badly to get this right. This could be her big chance. Her heart is racing. Jonathan, beside her, has his hand on his camera - ready to start documenting the situation. If they ever get there.

"Oh, don't be," Mrs. Driscoll says. "I kinda like the quiet. Or, at least, I did. This way. You know, you look very young for reporters."

Nancy's heart seizes in her chest, but Jonathan thinks on his feet. "We get that a lot."

Mrs. Driscoll rounds the back corner of the house, leading them through the sodden yard and towards the fringe of thick Indiana woods that backs up to the house. Jonathan meets Nancy's eyes. He wasn't entirely jazzed about this plan to begin with, and he looks even less so now.

"Look, I just - I just don't know if this is such a good idea," he had said as they climbed into the car, having made their clandestine escape from the Hawkins Post.

"Really? Because I feel like it's the best idea I've had all summer."

"Look, all I'm saying is, what's the harm in asking?"

"The harm in asking is that Tom will say no. We ask for forgiveness, not permission. And if this story's as good as I think it's gonna be, then Tom won't care. In fact, he'll thank us."

"Or the old lady is nuts and the story blows up in our face and Tom fires us."

"And then we never have to work at this shithole again."

Now that they're here, her cavalier optimism has run a bit dry. The house is a run-down but clearly well-loved wooden structure on the old end of town, with lace curtains in the windows and windchimes hung up from the eaves. A pile of chopped wood is built up at the side of the house, the chopping block beside it. Somebody else must

come by to chop wood for her - a grandson or helpful neighbor, maybe. Nancy can't imagine this sweet, round old woman lifting a hatchet. Fat as she is, she looks like a stiff breeze could push her right over.

"That's where they went," she says, halting abruptly. Her pointing finger sweeps down, from the woods to the ground, and Nancy sees what she's talking about immediately. There's a path. A very small, very clear path through the wet grass - as if dozens upon dozens of little bodies marched away single-file into the woods. But wherever they were all going, they're gone now.

"I have never seen rats act that way. Never, not once in my years. All marching along, one after another, hundreds of them. Like little soldiers. And the noise..." She shivers like a rabbit. "Like something out of my nightmares. I'll tell you. You know, I read an article in National Geographic once - you like that magazine? Yes, I love it. So many wonderful pictures. I just love the pictures of the baby penguins, all fuzzy. Like little cotton balls. Did you ever see those articles? Anyhow, I read an article in National Geographic once about a disease that affects ants. Makes them wander off from the colony, whole groups of them, makes them insane. And I thought, there's no way healthy rats would act like this. This has got to be some sort of disease. You really should have heard them. I'll tell you."

"And they all went off into the forest?"

"That's right."

Nancy shares a commiserating glance with Jonathan. As creepy as this is, there's not a whole lot they can document. It's pitifully lean evidence to work with. Jonathan hands over the umbrella, squats, and starts snapping a photo or two of the little path, just to have something - when Mrs. Driscoll puts her free hand on her hip.

"Oh!" she says, her glasses flashing in the light as she cranes her neck to beam up at Nancy with pride. "I almost forgot. I caught one of the little fuckers."

3. Episode Two: The Mall Rats - Part Two

Quick note: yes, homophobic people, I see you. No, I don't give a fuck. Mmkay? Mmkay. :)

Nancy

The camera flashes. The rat screams.

It's been pressed into the shadowy back corner of its cage, cringing away from the beam of dusty yellow light cast by the wobbling, naked bulb that hangs from the basement ceiling. And now, as Jonathan's camera goes off again, the rat goes nuts. Screeching, jerking away, scrabbling at the mesh of the cage like it's trying to dig its way out. Nancy exchanges a look with her boyfriend.

"Excitable little fellow, isn't he?" is Mrs. Driscoll's comment. She's standing back with a grin on her face, seeming pleased by all the fuss, letting Jonathan circle around the space with his Pentax. He's photographed the holes chewed in her walls by the departed stream of rodents; the remnants of her industrial-sized bags of cat food, shredded and nearly empty thanks to the small, hungry army that passed through; and now, the prisoner of war himself: the single unfortunate rat, digging frantically at the floor of its miniature cell.

"Has it been doing that this whole time?" Nancy asks. Her voice sounds a little uneven, even to her. The edge of her notepad is going damp and frayed with sweat, and she grips it tightly as she takes notes. The dim, dank basement has been giving her the creeps - and that was before the rat started screaming like that.

"On and off."

Jonathan has stopped taking pictures. He's crouched down in front of the table, frowning at the rat with an air of uneasiness, watching it howl and hiss and bash its little skull against the corner of the cage.

Its fur is grimy. Rail-thin, the knobs of its spine are visible under the matted gray pelt. It smells like sewer and dumpsters, even from

several paces away. Flecks of grayish foam crust around its mouth. Its long front teeth are a gritty, oily yellow, and its eyes are dull and black, like two little buttons. Shallow and vacant, even as it strains against the unyielding bars - trying frantically to move... where? Somewhere northeast, it seems. Like it's trying to follow its brethren into the forest.

But, no, Nancy reminds herself with a shake of her own head. She's letting her mind run away with her now; it couldn't know which direction the rest of the swarm went. Rats don't have compasses in their heads like birds do. It's just trying to escape the hot, blinding flash of the camera.

Fingers shaking, Nancy goes to crouch by Jonathan. She puts a hand on his shoulder, partly to steady herself as she crouches in her heels, partly just to squeeze him in a wordless, *this is it*. Her heart is beating against her ribs, hard and trembling, but she's not afraid anymore. She's excited. Because this? This is a story. Whether it's rabies or plague or whatever disease Mrs. Driscoll was on about - whatever it is, it's creepy. It's interesting. It's unusual. It's attention-getting.

And in a tiny, sleepy town like Hawkins, where nothing ever happens? It's news-worthy.

But if they're going to convince Tom of that, they're going to need as much evidence as they can get their hands on.

Twisting on her heels, using Jonathan for balance, Nancy looks up at Mrs. Driscoll. She quirks her pen towards the cage. "I don't suppose it would be possible for us to take this back with us."

Mike

The Party is up a creek without a paddle.

More specifically, they're down a dungeon without a bard.

And they're split up, which never ends well. They didn't *mean* to split up - it's just, the tunnel started collapsing around them, and a failed saving throw got Lucas's character trapped under a piece of debris. Now they're facing two different villains without their ranger, and to

make matters worse, the tunnel isn't done falling apart around their ears.

It's so weird for him not to be sitting behind the Dungeon Master screen. The table looks bigger from here, somehow, more open.

It's a whole different can of worms, being just a player in the game versus the DM. And Will has been stumbling a lot - having to stop and look things up, or ask Mike about a rule or a stat - but he's doing pretty well. It's a good campaign, honestly, and Mike did get into it for a while there. But the minutes are dragging on, and he can't help that his mind is wandering a little.

It's just, he wonders what El is up to. Probably curled up on the couch, watching a show. She's not really supposed to watch as much TV as she does, but Hop can't enforce rules when he's at work, and El takes calculated advantage of that. Plus, there's only so much she can do at the cabin by herself. Board games are a no-go; solo card games get dull fast. Mike has been bringing her books, but she's still pretty slow at reading and it frustrates her quickly. She prefers him to read to her aloud. If he was there, that's probably what they'd be doing. He'd be sitting on the couch with the book in front of him, and she'd be leaning against his shoulder, watching as he traced the words with his finger so that she could follow along. Or, if she was bored with trying to read along, she'd scoot down and rest her head in his lap and just listen. And then, when she got tired of reading altogether, she'd probably sit up and turn and kiss him right in the middle of a sentence to shut him up. She's subtle like that.

He's staring right through the game board by now, daydreaming with his chin in his hand. He's thinking about El's rosebud lips, her hot-chocolate-colored eyes, her button nose. About how holding her hand reassures him that she's *there* - how he still dreams, sometimes, that he turns around and she's gone again in a swirl of black flakes, like soot-snow.

She looks a lot different now than she did then. And Mike likes it - for the most part. How could he not? It's El. And those are the things you're supposed to notice, when you're dating your first-ever girlfriend. Like how soft her lips are - he's *mostly* used to the sticky lip gloss by now - and how long her hair has gotten. He liked it when it

was nearly nonexistent, he liked it when it was short and spongy-curly, and he likes it now that it's grown out, the weight of it pulling most of the curls into waves. He likes the way her nose scrunches up when she giggles, and he likes her perfume (some sort of musky-fruity thing that Nancy selected for her), and the way he can see the slight dip of her waist when she ties a jacket around her waist, cinching in her usually loose-fitting clothes. And he swears it's not like he's looking on purpose, but sometimes - every once in a blue moon - she'll twist just the right way, or the light will hit her at a certain angle, and he can make out the curve of her chest that wasn't there a year and a half ago.

That's something that surprised him a little, when they started seeing each other more often a few months after the Snow Ball: how much more she looks like... well, a girl. Her frame is slender, but just beginning to curve in ways that it didn't when they first met - not like the straighter, more rectangular shape of a boy. El's lips tend to blush pink, aided by the flavored gloss she favors, instead of red. El's hands are dainty and soft, nails sometimes painted a bright color, palms pink and white, lacking the callouses that boys tend to gain from bike riding and tree climbing and fort-building. El is still inches behind Mike, whereas Will is coming worryingly close to getting even with him. Not quite - Mike still has an inch and some on Will. He can't lift his chin and rest it on Will's head anymore, like he used to in seventh grade, but Will still has to look up at Mike - and one side of Mike's mouth twists up in a wry smile, because that, at least, has never changed. Will has always, ever since that first day on the preschool playground, had to tilt his chin up a degree to meet Mike's eyes with those hazel ones, which turn into a kaleidoscope of green and brown in the sun and -

"Mike."

Mike jolts out of his thoughts guiltily, head lifting from his hand. Will is watching him, waiting for a response.

"Your action?"

"Uh." Mike sits forward and scans the board.

The villains are closing in - both of them - and it honestly looks like

the Party might not make it through. But he's distracted now, his head not exactly in the game, and he flounders. He falls back on a standard attack, rolling the d6. On the next turn, Will's wizard casts lightning bolt - a risky move that ends up backfiring, dealing him a huge HP hit. Will's forehead crinkles up as he pencils in the damage onto his sheet. There's a real chance that Will the Wise could die here - and Mike kind of wishes he was more in the mood for this, because it's a moment of high tension for the Party. But his surge of energy has been depleted, and now he *really does* have to wrap things up and get going. He is so exceptionally late to meet his girlfriend. She's gonna be pissed.

Right in the middle of Will's next sentence, a sharp jangle cuts through the background patter of rain. The phone.

Mike's eyes meet Lucas's, both of them communicating the same thought: *that's gotta be one of the girls.*

They scramble for the receiver, chairs abandoned by the table, Will protesting, "Hey - come on -"

Lucas gets ahold of it and Mike wrenches it out of his hand, the silent wrestling match ending abruptly as Mike fits it to his ear and says, "Hello?" His heart sinks, the hopeful little spark in his chest going cold. "No... Sorry, not interested." He drops it back into the cradle. "Telemarketers."

He and Lucas exchange another glance. Surreptitiously, Lucas peeks at his watch.

"Well," he says, at the same time that Mike says, "Yeah, uh -"

They speak over each other, stumbling as Will's face begins to fall.

"It's getting kind of..."

"Good campaign. Good campaign, we should -"

"Yeah, we should definitely finish some... Sometime, uh -"

"I'm late for -"

"- need to get going pretty soon -"

"- really should check up on El, you know, she's been alone all day -"

"- fun though, we should... Yeah."

"Yeah."

Will is getting annoyed now. "Can't we finish the campaign? We're almost done. God, when did you guys get so boring?"

The annoyance carries over into Mike, and his lips flatten. Then he shrugs. "Okay, well... then I'll use my torch to set fire to the breach, sacrificing myself, killing the umber hulks, and saving the town."

"Victory," Lucas summerizes, and their high-five connects without looking.

"Okay." Will's staff bounces off the corner of the table as he drops it. "Fine. You guys win."

Will is shoving the hat off his head, snapping shut his notebook so fast that some of the pages crinkle, and Mike is surprised to see that Will is genuinely - and, it seems, deeply - upset. And Mike's stomach gives a sharp little twist. Because all at once he's looking at the board and the discarded costume and thinking, *oh, shit, I'm being a jerk.*

It's something that keeps happening - as Nancy has been all too happy to point out. Mike will be going along, just trying to live his life, and all at once he'll see the expressions on people's faces and realize what's been coming out of his mouth. And it's not like he means to be an asshole, he just... It just...

"Congratulations," Will snaps, and Mike lifts his hands in a *slow down* gesture.

"Will, I was just messing around," he offers.

Will shucks the costume with his back turned, and Mike circles around the table, trying to catch his eye. "Hey. Let's finish for real. How much longer is the campaign?"

Finally Will looks at him, but just long enough to spit out, "Just forget it, Mike."

"No -" Turning to Lucas for aid. "You want to keep playing, right?"

"Yeah - totally."

"We'll just call the girls afterwards."

Will wheels towards him, dishevelled bangs getting in his face, and Mike is taken aback by the harsh shout - "I said forget it, Mike, okay?" And just like that he's gone, striding across the basement without even collecting his things. "I'm going home."

"Come on, Will," Lucas says, but Will just shoves at him with a bark of, "Move!"

Mike climbs over a chair and brushes past Lucas to follow the retreating stomp of Will's footsteps. He chases him through the kitchen and out the garage door, calling after him.

"Will, come on."

The garage door is open, and a silvery curtain of driving rain delineates outside from in. Humidity hangs in the cool air like a tangible thing, thick in Mike's mouth, the taste like petrichor and asphalt. This is all wrong. Mike is the one that's supposed to storm out, seething and stubborn, secretly hoping that somebody follows him. Mike is the one that yells and loses his temper and kicks things around until he runs out of steam. Will is supposed to be the one that waits nearby, listening to him rant, silently communicating with his eyes how dumb Mike is being. He's the one that tells Mike to stop being a big baby and just come back inside already. But everything is all turned around this summer, and nothing is like how it used to be, and for once that puts a bad taste in the back of Mike's throat.

"You can't leave. It's raining."

Will is heaving his bike upright, shoulders hard, ignoring him. Mike darts over to stand almost-but-not-quite in the way, chest tight. Hating this. They fight all the time, but not like this. Not in a way that makes a sour sweat prickly up under his arms because he *knows*

something is really wrong.

"Listen, I said I was sorry, all right? It's a cool campaign, it's really cool. We're just not in the mood right now."

"Yeah, Mike, that's the problem." Will's voice is rough as sandpaper, and it rises as he goes on. His eyes are pinched at the corners, and Mike realizes with a sick *swoop* of his insides that Will is about to cry. "You guys are never in the mood anymore."

Will

He just wants to go home.

He's so stupid. This whole thing was so stupid. His face is burning.

"You're ruining our Party."

A defensive frown. "That's not true!"

"Really? Where's Dustin right now?"

Mike's head swivels minutely, his gaze flicking down.

"See? You don't know and you don't even care, and obviously he doesn't either and I don't blame him!" Will's words are starting to run together as his voice hitches up half an octave, but he can't stop now. If he runs out of angry momentum he'll probably cry. So he keeps shouting. "You're destroying everything, and for what? So you can swap spit with some stupid girl?"

His body gives a nearly imperceptible twitch, like a little electric shock, as the light at the front of the garage flickers. But, no. It wasn't a flicker. Just a flash of lighting, or maybe a tree branch bobbing in front of the porch light, and his own blurred vision tricking his paranoid brain into seeing things that aren't there - and meanwhile Mike is yelling back.

"El's not stupid! It's not my fault you don't like girls."

Everything in Will shudders to a halt. The rain is a staticky white noise pressing in on his eardrums like air pressure. His eyes flick back

and forth between Mike's, his mind catching and looping like a stuck record. He knows what the words mean - in a distant, muted way, he knows - but it's like he's stuck. Frozen. Like he can't breathe or talk or do *anything*. It's like a slap in the face, and Will can't even think. He can't un-stick himself from that one sentence, can't move his brain past it, not even when Mike's eyes close for a moment in a wince. And it's not fair. It's a cruel, pointed trick of the universe - the way that even now, in this moment, something in the back of Will's mind takes quiet note of the way Mike's dark lashes almost touch the pale skin of his cheeks when his eyes close. How his hair curls with the moisture. His freckles, his lips barely parted over his front teeth. And Will hates it, hates everything, the whole world, and hates Mike, and hates himself more than anything.

Mike's mouth opens and closes as he seems to search for words, and Will is still frozen-numb, his mind and body half a step out of sync.

Rain drumming, roaring on the garage roof. A fine mist of it bouncing back up from the pavement, drifting inside, sprinkling over his legs. Mike's curls just barely brushing one eyelash, almost getting caught.

It's not my fault you -

It's not -

It's not my fault you don't -

Mike

He didn't mean that. Not like that. He would never - he did *not* mean that. He wouldn't say that. Wouldn't think that. *Doesn't* think that. Will gets bullied enough for people saying he's...

Mike's mouth works for a moment, casting around for words, but his brain snags on the look in his best friend's eyes. A glassy, deer-in-the-headlights sheen. Will is *scared*. And Mike doesn't have time to think it through, he's been silent for too long already, and if he hadn't messed up before, he *really* has now. So he backpedals, hard.

"I'm not trying to be a jerk," he says, unsure where he's going even as

his mouth begins to run. Just anything, anything. Anything to move on from *that*. "Okay? But we're not kids anymore." The spark of fear in Will's eyes has dulled to hurt, and he holds Mike's gaze with a kind of cold, shaky bitterness as Mike says, "I mean, what did you think, really? That we were never gonna get girlfriends? That we were just gonna sit in my basement all day and play games for the rest of our lives?"

"Yeah." Will's face has twisted into something acidic, spitting his words as if to cover up the sniff that punctuates them. "I guess I did. I really did."

A cold, heavy, sinking feeling in his chest. Thick billows of invisible moisture rolling through the garage on bubbles of wind. The clatter of the bike stand as Will mounts and kicks off. His form hunched, silhouetted against the rain, and Mike is too late when he steps forward.

"Will -"

Silver plumes of water flung up from the bike tires as Will pushes away, the bike *whirring* underneath him.

"Will, come on!"

But he's talking to no one. Yelling with his arms lifted at his sides, with no answer except a crackle-grind of thunder. The tissues of his throat feel swollen, tender, and gooseflesh rises over his arms. It's sickeningly familiar. Standing in the mouth of the garage, watching Will ride away. How many times has he relived that memory? Looping it over and over in his mind, searching for clues, something he might have missed, something he could have done to stop it.

It was a seven.

Huh?

The roll. It was a seven. The Demogorgon. It got me. Whelp, see you tomorrow.

El

Rivulets of rain trace shifting patterns on the windowpane.

They got absolutely soaked running back to Max's house, and they're still a bit breathless, sniffing a little, noses cold and skin damp as they towel-dry their hair. Max's bright mane, sleek and shining with water, is a red flame in the middle of the room.

El smooths her fingers over the silky-new fabric of her clothes. She figured she may as well change into her new outfit, since her other one was all wet, and now she can't stop fiddling with the folds of material.

"Here."

Max tosses a few comic books on the ground between them. On the way home, they talked about using El's powers to spy on someone - an idea that made El somewhat nervous-giggly, because that's *definitely* against the rules - but they're saving that for later. For now, Max was the one that suggested comics.

When she settles onto the carpet, she drags a quilt down off her bed and slings it around both of their shoulders. It's slashed across with faded rainbow arcs. "It's crazy how cold this house gets. I swear, it was never this chilly in the summer back home. In California, I mean."

El isn't cold. She's used to the cold. Used to long, long, *long* nights curled up under the snow-heavy, sap-tacky boughs of trees, arms pulled into the oversized stolen coat to keep warm. Yes - she's used to the cold. But she doesn't want to move away, either. Max's arm and shoulder brushes hers under the quilt, their body heat filling the little bubble within moments. Max smells like something good, but not sugar-sweet - some sort of fruit, El thinks, or maybe a flower.

"I bet it's nice to get a day away from Mike, huh?"

El glances to the radio on Max's bedside table. It's turned off. They didn't want the guys interrupting their girls-only day. El shrugs.

"I bet the boys are having a nice time, too. He's probably not being such a jerk."

Max huffs a shallow laugh, but El cocks her head as she puts down her towel. "What do you mean?"

Max's autumn-leaf hair falls in front of her face as she turns away a degree, looking at nothing in particular, like she's uncomfortable. "I mean." An answering shrug. "Well, Mike tends to laser-focus on you. You know? Like, you're the only thing he sees when you two are together."

"Isn't that... romantic?" It sounds romantic. It sounds like something someone on TV would say. But Max makes a face.

"Um... I mean, I guess? Kind of? But kind of... I dunno, it's different. How he is with the Party, it's different."

El mulls this over. It doesn't sound so bad - does it? After all, she's different with Mike, too.

But that's the thing. She's different with Mike - and she's different with Max, and with Hop, and with Will and the Party. She was different with Aunty Becky. She was different with Kali. There are a lot of different Els.

Not Eleven. Not Hopper's daughter. Not Mike's girlfriend. Just you.

The problem: she's not sure who *just El* is. Who is she when she's alone, other than lonely?

She wonders if there are a lot of different Mikes, too. If he's a different Mike with the Party than he is with her, is there a different Mike for Will? For his mama? For Nancy? For when he's all alone? Does he feel like one person, or does he feel splintered and *ambiguous* like her?

Her eyes light on the comics on the floor. El likes comic books. They're easier to read than the thick, word-filled books that Hop and Mike bring her, and the stories are always exciting. This one has a raven-haired woman on the cover that El hasn't seen before. A queen, maybe - she's wearing a golden crown. El points.

"Who is that?"

Max does a double take. "See, this is why you can't just hang out with Mike all the time." She scoops up the book with a flourish. "This is Wonder Woman. AKA Princess Diana. She's from Paradise Island, which is, like, this hidden island where there are only women Amazon warriors."

El settles her head against Max's shoulder to see better, and when Max doesn't shrug her off, she stays there.

Outside, thunder rolls through the clouds.

Dustin

"Is Will here?"

Dustin, Steve, and Robin look up from their work. Lucas, out of breath and dripping, stands at the counter of Scoops.

"No?" Dustin looks around, just in case. "No."

"Have you seen him?"

"No." His eyes narrow. "Why?"

"Dude, where have you been? We were trying to get ahold of you." Lucas ducks under the divider to join them behind the counter, to a halfhearted objection from Steve. "Mike and Will just had some sort of fight, I don't know, I didn't really see it, I -" He runs his hands over his face, knocking his hat askew. "I don't even know what happened, man. Will ran off, who knows where he is. Mike went after him. I'm supposed to check here, but it... looks..."

Lucas, finally winding down from his spiel, has caught sight of their base of operations through the window to the back room.

"Uh... What's happening?"

The break table in the back of Scoops has been transformed into a tactical headquarters. They've spread out a huge expanse of butcher paper to write on; Robin's *You Rule vs You Suck* board has been repurposed for notes and equations; Dustin's library books sprawl out over the table, bookmarked to various pages, wide open. The tape

recorder sits on one corner and his radio, tuned to what they've dubbed The Code Channel, fizzles on another. They've been hard at work all day. It's late afternoon - no, Dustin sees as he checks his watch, early evening now.

"We're spying on the government," Robin stage-whispers. She's technically supposed to be manning the counter, but they haven't had a customer for a while now, and she keeps drifting into the back to be nosy. Dustin can tell that she isn't really taking this seriously - she doesn't quite believe his theory. But she's bored, and Steve likes her no matter what he says to the contrary, and they could use the extra head. No harm letting her help.

Lucas, on the other hand -

"Sorry," Dustin says with crossed arms, "This is a Scoops private party."

But Lucas is already pushing through the door to the back room, dripping all over the floor, reaching for an open book. "Is this one of your experiments, or...?"

"It's none of your business, is what it is," Dustin shoots back, grabbing the book out of Lucas's hand and snapping it closed. Steve gives him a *don't be a jerk* look, but Dustin pretends not to see. "Oh, what, *now* you're interested? You couldn't be bothered to help out last night but now you want to partake in the spoils? Well, that's too bad. This is our secret code, now get lost."

"You picked up a secret code on Cerebro?"

"Maybe we did, maybe we didn't."

Lucas, seeing he's serious, sighs and put on a contrite face. "All right, I'm sorry. Really." He extends a hand. "Peace?"

Dustin considers. His friend doesn't sound nearly as apologetic as he'd like, ideally, but... "Yeah. Peace. Now - check *this* out."

They catch Lucas up over pilfered sample spoonfuls. His expression goes from skeptical to curious to wide-eyed as Dustin talks.

They've been listening in on the government channel since they picked it up earlier today. The chatter isn't constant, but it's regular. They've heard somewhere between six and ten voices - it's hard to differentiate some of them - and what they've learned is... not much, to tell the truth. It's all very coded, or maybe just niche. Not to mention that the signal keeps getting fuzzed, going just barely in and out of range.

What they do know: IDCs are, as far as they can figure, some sort of containment device. They figure that's what the CD part stands for. Or rather, *Robin* figured that. And it makes sense - from what they've heard, these device-gadgets are meant to contain some sort of substance. Contain it, or maybe destroy it. Break it down chemically, maybe, to stop it - whatever *it* is - in its tracks. Or maybe it's not chemical at all? He hasn't quite sussed that out yet. Whatever the case, these IDC things are meant to prevent *something* from spreading past a certain barrier. Steve suggested lava, and was shot down by Robin, who said it could be some sort of infestation. Something as common and unremarkable as termites or rats.

Whatever the devices are, the government has been either making them or receiving them somewhere inside Starcourt.

"Why the mall?" is Lucas's first question.

"I mean, it sort of makes sense," Dustin reasons. He's stationed at the table again, wreathed in open books and scribbled notes, happily mired in his work. "If they need to transport these things into their super-secret base, it's a lot less conspicuous to be delivering something to a shopping mall than it would be to drive a bunch of big government trucks out into the wilderness."

Lucas is looking over his notes, trying to make sense of the organized chaos. He's making that face he makes when something doesn't quite add up. Then he meets Dustin's eyes, suddenly. "I bet it's underneath."

"What?"

"The government base. I bet it's underneath the mall."

Dustin processes this, then looks to Steve, who looks through the

window at Robin. Robin doesn't notice; the rare trickle of customers arrived and she had to go up front to actually do her job for once.

"I mean, we know it's not anywhere *in* the mall," Lucas goes on. "We've been all over this thing. There's no way there'd be room for a whole government base. But your radio is picking up their transmissions, so it can't be very far away. So it's gotta be underneath."

Dustin can feel his eyes going big. "Like a secret tunnel system. Like *Mazes and Monsters*!"

Lucas makes a face. "*Mazes and Monsters*? You could've picked any secret tunnel system in all of fiction and you picked *Mazes and Monsters*?"

"You wanna come up with a better example?"

"*Dark Crystal*," Lucas says immediately, smug, and Dustin shakes his head.

"That's not a secret tunnel system, that's just tunnels. And really it's just some cave hallways or whatever."

"*Secret* tunnels, underneath a castle!"

To drown out their squabbling, Robin twists up the volume of the in-store radio, and the first chorus of *Teenage Wasteland* crashes through the air. Then Robin is standing at the partition, making direct eye contact as she turns it up a notch higher, and Dustin is batting a hand at her telling her he can't hear himself think, and Lucas is rubbing his eyes like he has a headache, and it's over all that noise that they hear Steve scream.

Well, *scream* is perhaps an exaggeration. It was really more of a yelp. A distressed squeak, if you will. Robin punches down the volume and leans into the back, frowning as they listen.

"You alive back there, Dingus?" she calls.

A moment later, Steve comes power-walking out of the way-back. "There was a rat," he announces. "An honest-to-god *rat*."

He shakes himself with a shudder, and Robin bursts out laughing.

"There was not," she says, and Steve grabs a mop like he's about to go deliver some rodent reckoning. He peers towards the way-back.

"I'm telling you, it was -" he cuts off and holds his palms apart to demonstrate size.

"You can deal with slimy demo-" Lucas glances at Robin, then amends, "You can deal with a pack of, uh, feral dogs, but you can't handle one little mouse?"

"Rat," Steve corrects. "Big difference, buddy."

Robin folds herself through the window, perching on the partition to fix him with an amused smirk. "Well, see, I told you. Your super-secret government code is probably all a clandestine arrangement with pest control."

"Still doesn't explain the original code," Dustin offers, but by now they're too busy bickering to hear him.

His radio clicks, squeals, and a woman's voice comes on. He dives for it, yanking a pad of paper towards him, ready to transcribe.

Joyce

Joyce hates this place.

She hated it when she had to take Will here every month for the doctors to poke and prod him, taking detailed records of his height, his weight, his blood pressure, pupil dilation, reflexes, brainwaves. The pattern of his speech. The trace of shadow in his blood. And that was before the end of October - before the real horrors started.

The worst moment of her life happened here. Watching her child scream his throat bloody-raw in agony as they rolled him down the acid-white-blue fluorescent-lit hallway on a stretcher.

It was the powerlessness that really broke her, right then. Even when Will was pronounced dead, that first November, she could still do

something. She could still look for him, she could still keep trying, she could do *something*. But when they had him on that stretcher, alive and writhing with his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat, there wasn't one single thing she could do except hold him - and they hadn't even let her do that.

Now, like then, they enter straight through the front doors.

Jim already cut a hole in the chain link fence to get them onto the sealed, abandoned property. Now, as they huddle against the side of the building to stay out of the stinging, driving rain, he works at the chain on the double doors. It's a heavy, dull silver chain, dripping with moisture and clinking musically as he repositions his grip with a swear. If it wasn't for the deafening roar of rain, Joyce would be chewing her nails with nerves over somebody hearing them.

"Here," she says suddenly as the wire cutters slip in his hands. She needs to do something or she'll crawl out of her skin. "Here, let me."

He grumbles something she can't hear over the rain, but hands it over, and she braces the metal pinchers on either side of a link and throws herself into it. The pinchers bite down on the link - a cold, grating feeling through the rain-slick handles. She leaves two sharp little indentations in the link, but in the end, it's Jim that breaks the chain. He pulls it from the handles in a cacophony of rattling, and then all at once the doors are opening, signs flashing momentarily in a gout of lightning -

Warning! Restricted Area. This building has been declared a restricted area by the authority of the Commanding Officer in accordance with the provisions of the directive issued by the Secretary of Defense. (Section 21, Internal Security Act of 1950.) Unauthorized entry is prohibited.

- and darkness yawns within.

It's the smell that, for the first time since they hatched this plan on the floor of Melvald's, makes her hesitate. The summer has been scorching, but the exhale of stale air that pushes out between the doors is ice cold. It smells just like she remembers. Not just like the lab, but like *that night* in particular. Sterile-chemical-hospital smell; the metal-and-ozone smell of fried wires and haywire electronics;

spores from the tunnel; and the dogs. Those demodogs from the Upside Down, their rubbery flesh carrying the rot-stench of their birthplace.

She's never quite forgiven Dustin and Steve Harrington for shoving one into her fridge. Maybe they didn't quite deserve the amount of shouting she did, but the thing nearly sent her into cardiac arrest. She swore she could still smell it, even weeks after some of Dr. Owens' government friends came and packed it away in a nondescript white van.

Jim is already a few feet in, clicking on the flashlight from his belt, before he notices that she's still at the entrance. "You okay?" he asks, but before he finishes she's already muttering, "Fine," and stepping into the shadows. She doesn't need him worrying over her.

Lacy shreds of shattered glass still cling to the frames of the inner glass doors. The fractals of cracks catch the light of Joyce's own flashlight as she turns it on. More crumbles of glass on the floor, crunching under her work shoes. Brown leaves on the dust-gray tiles.

The lobby is big, and open, and empty, and dark. Their flashlights, along with the watery bar of light from the open door, are the only sources of light. Their footsteps echo. Here and there, a haunting sign of disarray: a plaster ceiling tile shattered on the floor. An overturned row of waiting chairs.

She's trying not to think about it. She's really trying. But when Jim's flashlight beam lingers for a moment on the bold letters in the center of the floor - **hnl** -

Bob. Bob, sweating in his mint green hospital scrubs, the coiled earpiece dangling from his ear. Bob seeing her across the lobby, straightening, smiling, *thank god he's okay, thank god* -

And then the dog. Bob's grunt of shock, the lobby echoing and reverberating with screams, the skull-splitting *crack! crack! crack!* of Jim's gun, and then more dogs pouring into the lobby and her shoes skidding over the tiles as Jim hauled her away through the doors -

hnl

They both avoid the letters as they cross the lobby, hugging the walls, heading for the doors that will take them deeper into the lab.

"No one here," she says - whispers, really, since she can't bring herself to break the dusty silence. There's a draft, somewhere, and the building seems to breathe. Icy air slithering past her cheeks. The whistle of breeze somewhere. Thunder outside, muffled through all the floors above them.

"Yet," Jim says, but she shakes her head.

"There's no one here." This she says aloud - her voice pitched low, barely loud enough to hear, but aloud. There's no point whispering. No one has been in here for a long time. "I'm sorry, I don't even know what we're doing here. This is..."

She leans against the nearest corner, nearly blinding herself with her flashlight when she reaches up to rub her eyes.

Jim returns from where he had been scouting a few feet ahead. She can hear his footsteps; even with her eyes closed against the memories she can tell when he stops just beside her. "Maybe," he says, lowly. "Or maybe not."

She opens her eyes, gestures - blinding *him*, this time. "You said yourself you've been watching. If there was somebody in here you would have seen it."

"Joyce -"

"Listen, I'd rather just go. Okay? This was a mistake."

"Joyce. You know something I've learned about you?"

She halts, looking up at him skeptically. He's already gazing down at her. Since he adopted El, stress eating has started to catch up with him. He's a little more padded around the middle, of late. *Built like a hobbit*, was Will's way of putting it once. Except hobbits are about four feet tall, and the chief of police has always towered over her. Joyce feels like the hobbit, looking up at him in the darkness that her eyes are just starting to adjust to.

"Your gut instinct is usually right," he says. "If you say something is wrong, something is wrong. Let's poke around a bit, yeah?"

She gives an uncomfortable head-bob. Thinking. If they're following her gut, then -

"Down," she decides. "You would have noticed if anyone was in the upper levels. If anyone was here they'd be underground."

He agrees with a single nod and they're off, padding wordlessly through the halls, jumping at every tiny noise until they reach a stairwell. The complete blackness below is stomach-flipping, and for a moment, she feels like a little girl again. Five years old and standing at the top of the basement stairs, looking down into the spongy darkness and wondering - no, *knowing* that there was something down there, despite what everyone assured her.

Jim speaks up and she startles a little.

"And speaking of," he says, as if their conversation hadn't underwent a two minute gap. "You know, I was thinking... with Melvald's not doing so hot and all. Maybe you'd want to come work with me."

She laughs, then - actually laughs, and then covers her mouth with a hand as it echoes around them. "With you? As a - what, a police officer?"

She thought he was just kidding around, being ridiculous just to get her to laugh. But if he's joking, he doesn't show it when he says, "I was thinking more detective."

"Detective Byers." She scoffs.

"It has a ring to it."

She shakes her head. And maybe that laugh did her some good, because she's the one that steps forward first, leading them down into the dark.

Will

He's in Castle Byers, and it's all wrong.

All of this is wrong.

He's been hanging out in here, hiding away from everything, for several hours. He's been trying to read some comic books, trying to distract himself, but it's not working, and it's so frustrating because it just doesn't work anymore, it doesn't *fit* anymore - just like him, folded in half to fit in his fort. The only place he ever felt safe in the Upside Down, the only constant safe place he's had since the night his dad left, and he doesn't fit anymore. It's not the fort - nothing is wrong with the fort, it's *him*. It's Will. It's that he has to stoop to avoid scraping his head on the tarp roof, now, and his legs are cramped from being curled up inside the too-small space, and he can't even get lost in a comic book anymore. He stares at the pop of color on the page, reads the words, follows the plot, but it's all muted. Disconnected. It's just ink on a humidity-swollen page. It's not working. Nothing *works* anymore, nothing is *right* anymore, it's all wrong and *he's* wrong and -

He slaps down the comic with a huff.

The rain is getting in. Droplets pepper the comic, his arms and legs, the blanket beneath him. Everything is damp. Not slimy, but *damp*, in a way that's much too similar.

He realizes, all at once, that the rain could end up destroying all of this by the end of the night. Castle Byers isn't exactly up to architectural code. He turns, his eyes moving over everything in the fort. Little pieces of his life that he hoarded away in here. Memories, mostly. Toys and ticket stubs. There's a Dungeons and Dragons book becoming waterlogged next to one wall. Will the Wise, drawn on lined school paper, tacked to a support beam. Crumpled tubes of acrylic paint on the upturned-crate-turned-table. And then he sees the pictures.

A drop of water makes the Party's Ghostbuster picture tremble, and Will picks it up, thinking he'll wipe off the water. Thinking that he'll save it. The storm might wash away the rest of his fort, but he at least has to save the picture. He never quite gets around to putting it in his pocket, though. He's stuck as soon as his eyes land on Mike.

Will knows. He's known since the Upside Down, really, though for a

long time afterwards he tried hard to un-know. But the shed last November was the nail in the coffin, and now -

Will knows he loves Mike.

Kind, loud, messy, outgoing, stubborn Mike. The natural leader. The Paladin. Smart, confrontational Mike, who wears his heart on his sleeve and cares so deeply about things being fair. Clumsy, brave, demonstrative Mike, who really can be an asshole sometimes. With his dark, wavy hair and deep-dark eyes and smattering of caramel colored freckles, and his slanted cheekbones, and his smile. Mike.

But Mike -

Does he know?

That's been the question stewing in the back of Will's mind ever since that moment in the Wheelers' garage. The same question, the same thoughts going around and around in his mind.

Does he know? Does Mike *know*? He said - well, he could have meant something else, but... But the way he flinched after... As if he *knew* what he said was over the line. As if he *knew* exactly how close to home he hit.

It's not my fault you don't like girls.

Isn't it?

Jim

"The hell's that?"

The place is a ghost town, and yet Jim hasn't been able to shake the feeling that there's something just around the corner. Maybe he's just paranoid. Maybe it's just the deep-carved muscle memory, on high alert for the click of long, curved claws on the tile floor, the chortling cackle of the creatures from the tunnels. Or maybe - just maybe - they were right to come here.

Because now they're standing in the old control room of the lower levels, surrounded by lifeless consoles full of buttons and spiderwebs,

and something isn't right.

"I dunno," he mutters in answer to Joyce's whispered question.

This is where the Gate was. This is where El first opened it, that fateful night when a young boy vanished into thin air - and this is where she closed it again. Way down here in the belly of the lab, where the scientists in their white hazmat suits used to bustle about, self-important in their work.

Now, Jim and Joyce crouch together at the doorway of the control room, peering down into the gaping hole in the ground where, once, demodogs emerged. Clicking their flashlights. Trying to see through the dark and the dust and the haze of cobwebs. Except -

Not nearly as many cobwebs as there should be. In fact, there are hardly any down here. In the upper levels, you couldn't walk five feet without walking straight into one. Here, they've barely seen ten spiders - and that, believe it or not, is a low number.

That on its own wouldn't be so concerning. No, what's concerning is the enormous hole they're staring into.

The Gate is gone - El made sure of that - but something's not right. The cavern where it used to be looks tattered, like a scar. A wound in the fabric of spacetime. The lab told him they had sealed the whole thing up with concrete, but now that gaping wound in the floor is back, pieces of gray sealant clinging to the sides, crumbling away, like an infected gash in the building. The effect is worsened by a black burn mark licking up the wall of the cavern below. An effect of the fire in the tunnels... maybe. Jim hunkers down as far as he can, getting on his belly to see into the yawning pit. Their flashlights barely penetrate the shadows.

"I thought they sealed that up," Joyce says.

"They did." He flicks his light at the chunks of concrete. "Look."

She gets on her belly beside him to see, and for several moments, silence rules. He finds himself acutely, uncomfortably aware of how deep underground they are. How many tons of metal and concrete

and glass are above them - how hard it would be to find their way out if they dropped their flashlights down this endless hole.

"Why would they seal it up and then clear it all away again?" he mutters. "And then why would they leave it?"

Because that's the thing: there *are* cobwebs. Not as many as there should be, but they're there. Someone came and did this. Someone opened up the hole again; someone climbed down into the cavern. Someone blasted that far wall with... *something*, fire maybe, something to make it turn all blackened and cracked like that. But whoever it was, they haven't been back for a while.

There's something else, and he grabs Joyce's arm so suddenly she squeaks. "Look," he says, pointing with his light. Down, down, down into the dark, all the way to the bottom.

"What?" she hisses, and he jiggles his light at the distant... what? Slab of concrete? Table? Whatever it is, it wasn't there before. It wasn't there when Dr. Owens took him down to see the Gate, and it wasn't there when he returned with El to close it - but it's there now.

"That platform?" Joyce says, and he nods.

"It wasn't there before." He clicks off his light and rolls over, sitting up. "Someone's been here. Someone's been..."

He trails off, because he doesn't want to voice the horrible suspicion that's taking form in his mind. Joyce's eyes are huge, the whites glinting in the dark as she scoots herself away from the hole and stands. She breathes, heavily, and then looks at him and says it herself.

"Someone's been trying to open the Gate again."

"It doesn't make sense. I've been watching. I would have known if this place was in use again. I mean, they would have needed equipment, people..."

"You think Owens?" Joyce says. Her voice is hollow. She's sitting on an equipment cart at the edge of the control room, he flashlight

aimed at the ground between her feet. Jim is pacing.

He gives it some thought. Then - "No. No, I've been in contact with him since November." He thinks of the doctor's mangled leg, his limp. "And somehow I doubt he'd be at all keen on opening this up again."

"Then who?"

"And how?" He stops pacing. "It doesn't make sense. Joyce, I swear to you. I have been watching."

Her head lifts. There's an idea brewing behind her eyes; he can see it. "Unless..." she ventures. "Unless they knew that."

Will

"Stupid."

Ghostbusters and D&D. Crayon drawings. Comic books. Toys. Popsicle stick crafts.

Kid stuff. Stupid kid stuff.

Of course nobody wanted to play D&D today. Of course nobody has wanted to play for *weeks*. It's because he's the only one who's still trying to hang onto it.

Everyone else has moved on. Why can't he? Why can't he pack away old toys and enjoy going to the mall and the pool and the movies like everyone else? They're all growing up. Him included. And it's not fair. He's supposed to have more time.

More time before suddenly he's an adult and he has to face everything alone. Trade in everything fun and good for things that are just *necessary*. Work and bills. Round and round.

More time before he becomes cynical and cruel like his father, or tired and overworked and anxious like his mother, or fake like Karen Wheeler, or empty like her husband. Or dead like all those people like him in the news.

He's not supposed to grow up yet.

They aren't supposed to grow up yet. They can't. He can't. He's not ready.

And Will hates himself for how betrayed he feels. Not just because the Party is leaving him behind, but because *Mike* is. And he knows it's dumb, and unfair, and untrue, but it doesn't stop him from feeling abandoned. Like Mike's place at Will's side - his attention and even occasional affection - were revoked and redirected when somebody more interesting came into his life, and it's not the same, he *knows* it's not the same, but it's so much like when his dad left. Like being all of five years old again and not understanding why his dad didn't want him anymore, not understanding why he wasn't good enough, thinking that maybe if he had been a better son his dad would have wanted to stay -

Or maybe if he wasn't so stupid his friends wouldn't be leaving him in the dust. Maybe if he wasn't the way that he is, none of this would have ever happened. Maybe if he just could have been born *normal*, he'd still have a dad and he'd still have his best friend. If he had been normal, maybe the Upside Down would have never picked him. Maybe that was his punishment. The universe's way of saying, *you're not supposed to exist*.

"So stupid," he says again, and he only realizes that he's crying when his voice cracks hideously.

The Party smiles up at him from the rain-splattered photograph. Dustin, and Mike, and Lucas, and himself. Grinning big and posing in their cobbled-together Ghostbusters costumes.

The same costumes they were still wearing later that night, when Mike walked him home. When Mike wrapped his arm around Will's shoulders and their steps fell into sync like they always do, and they dumped their candy out together and sat side-by-side on the couch in the basement. And Will told Mike what he had seen. He told Mike about the Shadow. About the Upside Down. About feeling like he was going crazy. And Mike said that they were going crazy together. And Will thought -

He thought -

He was so stupid.

So, so stupid to think it meant anything.

The damp paper crumples easily in his hands, and then he's tearing it, ripping it down the middle, and again, and when he throws it to the ground he snatches Will the Wise off the wall.

The stupid costume. The stupid D&D campaign. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

He grabs, rips, tears. Papers flutter to the ground. He's crying in big, wet, jolting heaves, and the force of it hurts his ribs.

He needs to grow up.

He wants it gone. He hates this, all of this, himself, the fort, the picture, all of it, everything. He wants it gone. He wants to smash it all to pieces until there's no evidence that it ever existed.

His hand closes around the handle of the baseball bat. And he's crawling. Out through the sheet door, into the lashing, bitter rain. Standing, the rain stinging his skin, ugly-crying as he starts to swing. Mud slips under his shoes and the first impact sends an electric shock up his arms and through his shoulders, so harsh and so sudden it makes his teeth chatter. He swings again. The world is a blur of rain and saltwater, the little battery powered lamp inside Castle Byers glimmering a faint golden even as he strikes again, again, again, and then he hurls the bat aside and starts in on the structure with his hands, yelling, "Fuck -"

And he rarely ever swears like that, with that word, but once it's out of his mouth he says it again, and a third time. Knowing no one will hear him out here, over the rain and the wind and the thunder, but half-hoping that someone does anyway.

He yanks down support beams. Tears off the remaining shred of a sign, feeling splinters bite deep into his fingers and not caring. Rips off the protective blue tarpaulin.

He thinks he might throw up. Something has been building in the pit of his gut, some antsy, crackling tension. Bracingly hot-cold, lashing out along the path of his veins. His hands burn like he plunged them

into TV static as he throws apart the last of his childhood refuge, and he doesn't have time to wonder about it before his ankle catches on something and he falls. Hard. Teeth jarring together, tailbone bruised, face hot, eyes aching. Crying like a baby. Like a stupid, pathetic little kid.

And that's where it happens. Right there, sitting in the wreckage, crying, lightning strobing over the sky close enough to pop his ears when the thunder *cracks* all around him. That's when he feels the Mind Flayer again.

That horrible, dry, aching *flutter* scrapes through his nerves, prickling hard in the back of his neck, and he lurches to his feet. Gasping at the numb-cold *swoop* that drains through him again, like the bottom dropping out of the universe.

It's coming. He's coming. He's coming for Will, and he's coming *fast* -

One second, driving rain. The next, nothing. Nothing but cold and wet and gray, and thunder that echoes like the forest is a reverberation chamber.

His head whips back and it's already there. The Mind Flayer - and yet not. Not the whole shape of him. Just a piece. A shred. Like one of his spiderlike legs, detached - a form of its own. A dust-gray *shape*, twisting and writhing in the air like a flock of starlings. Screaming towards Will over the Upside Down forest at an incomprehensible speed, as if the piece of Shadow he expelled from his veins last fall has found him again - and wants back in.

Will whirls for Castle Byers, years-old instincts telling him that he can hide there, he'll be safe there -

But even this shadowy imitation of the fort is destroyed. Smashed and pulled apart, vines already making their slow progress over the ruins.

So he runs.

Limbs numb, lips numb. Flailing through the blue-gray gloom of night, lungs heaving and catching and spasming as he coughs.

Senseless, animal terror.

Trees are vertical slashes of black in the murk. Lacelike swaths of fungus break off wetly as he sprints past. Leaves and vines and organic detritus, slick and spongy under his feet. He half-slides down a small hill. Can't see. Branches whip his arms, face. Numbness explodes through his arm as his elbow bangs off of a trunk, but that shadow, that little shred of the Mind Flayer, is close behind him. Catching up. The *sound* - that dry, screaming, scraping *sound*, like a million insect wings -

Rain. An icy slap of water that makes Will sputter, confused, lost - he's in the real world again, pelting through the woods -

A sickening shock as his shoelace catches on something and his hands flash out in front of him, too late to stop his fall. He barks his knuckles, takes the skin clean off his knee, retches, sobs out half a plea, and kicks to his feet again. The rain is gone. He's in the Upside Down. He blunders through mud and muck, the taste of it in his mouth, the burn of toxins at the back of his throat, in his lungs -

He can't look back, won't, but he can hear it. It's weaving between trees, the *whoosh* of its movements like a tornado. And then he does look back and he sees it. Darting across the sky over the branches, closing the distance between them by the second. No longer a distant smudge in the dark sky, but a solid mass the size of a car.

It's the field all over again. He's back in his nightmares - really, truly this time, with no relief of waking up. It's going to happen again. It's going to take him again, and he can't stop it.

Pain. His ears ring like a bell. He's on the ground again; he thinks he ran into a branch. It caught him directly in the eye. His diaphragm heaves, and he prays to anyone listening that he doesn't vomit, please, not now. The left half of his face throbs, temple-to-jaw. His cheek feels wet. His head swims.

Rain again, for a split second. And then again, a moment longer. And then he's back in the Upside Down. Red lightning, echoes of thunder. The *whooshing* scream of the Shred beginning its dive.

"Ow," he says, because it's the only thing his scrambled brain can reach, "Ow, shit - shit -"

He doesn't remember standing but he's on his feet again, sprinting, breathing so hard he can't tell if he's sobbing or hyperventilating and he can feel the tendrils of shadow grazing the hair on the back of his head and -

Out of desperation, Will pivots. He turns, lifts one hand as if he's hurling something at the shadow behind him though his hands are empty - he *screams*, wordless, a guttural expression of terror and rage and defiance. He thinks maybe it was *no*. *No, not this. Not again. I won't let you.*

His vision wavers, tunneling, spots of white spinning at the edges of his narrowing field of view. Something lurches in the very pit of his stomach, everything inside him *jolting* like he was electrocuted, his extended arm burning with pins and needles - and then all at once, it's over. He finds himself on his knees in the mud, in the real world, dizzy, the world spinning, rain sleucing down his tee shirt, his arm completely numb -

And above him, he can see the swirling Shred of shadow retreating, streaking off into the night.

He gropes at his face, his head, his mouth and eyes and ears, panicked, choking and gagging on spit and rainwater, but - he doesn't feel it. It's not in him. It didn't get him. He did it. Somehow, this time... he did it. He made it go away.

He stumbles to his feet, bleary. Still pawing at his face, hooking fingers into his mouth to check for anything that might have gotten inside. He grimaces when his hand grazes his left cheek.

For the past few moments he's been hearing something, but only now does he recognize the noise. It's a voice - a human voice. A boy's voice. He drifts towards it.

Mike

"Will!"

No, no, no, *no*. This cannot be happening.

"Will, where are you?"

The beam of his flashlight hangs in the air, made solid by the curtain of rain.

He didn't panic when Will wasn't home. He didn't panic when Lucas wouldn't radio back. No, Mike only panicked when he finally tried the only other place that he knew Will would be - only to find Castle Byers in pieces.

Now he's screaming. Drifting first one way and then the other, unable to pick a direction, heart jackhammering with an unnamed terror.

"Will!"

A figure stumbles into the beam of light so suddenly that Mike audibly startles, and then he's rushing forward, clapping Will into a tight hug.

"Oh, god - oh, shit, Will, I thought - I saw Castle Byers and I thought something... hap..."

He had drawn back to let Will breathe, and in doing so, he now sees the blood. Rusty-red, it oozes down Will's cheek and over his lips, coming from his nose and from a deep scrape just below his eye. Will is breathing like he ran a mile, shaking so hard his hands vibrate, his form a chilled, rain-drenched lump of gangly limbs and wild eyes.

"What happened?"

Will's mouth opens and closes. Like he's struggling to find words. His bangs drip into his eyes. Then he draws in a shallow, wobbling breath and glances towards the remains of Castle Byers. "I wrecked it," he says thickly, and breaks down.

Mike wraps his arms around Will's shoulders again while he cries. He has no idea what the hell is going on. He's totally at a loss for what else to do, and besides, this calms his own frantic mind. Will isn't dead. He's not trapped in the Upside Down again. He's here and he's alive and he's flesh-and-blood, getting blood and snot all over the

shoulder of Mike's raincoat.

Mike drops his face into Will's hair, heart still kicking away at his ribs so hard it hurts, and something in his chest gives a relieved, contented little sigh when Will's own arms come up to squeeze around him in turn.

Joyce

Tunnels.

Not Upside Down tunnels. Manmade. Echoing concrete tunnels that seem to go on for miles.

That, as they discovered, was how someone had been sneaking to and from the lab.

Joyce's feet ache. She thought they'd never find their way aboveground again - but here they are. The tunnel they chose led them straight from the basement of the Hawkins National Laboratory to an old, crumbling farmhouse on the outskirts of Hawkins. At least, she assumes it's an abandoned farmhouse. The tunnel came up directly in the center of an empty, boarded-up kitchen.

Rain drums on the roof, which leaks in several places. Joyce rubs her arms

"It's clear," Jim says, startling her.

It's the first thing either of them has said since they crept from the mouth of the tunnel, his gun at the ready in case they ran into whoever was responsible for their subterranean adventure. But there's no one here. He had gone to do a sweep of the house to confirm; now he returns, carrying something under his arm.

"Find something?"

"Maybe."

He sets it down on the rickety kitchen table. His flashlight illuminates a nondescript brown cardboard box.

"It was by the front door," he says, peeling open the top. "Exit's that way, by the way. Looks like we're southeast of the Smiths' place. Must've walked two goddamn miles down there."

Inside the box: papers. Sheaves of thin, bright-white office paper. She reaches in to thumb through them.

"Doesn't exactly look like Farmer McDonald's tax returns," he says. "Gotta be from the lab."

"Why leave them behind?"

"I don't think they did. Not on purpose. It was by the front door on its side, like it fell off a dolly or something."

His voice is rough from dehydration. It must have been two hours since they climbed out of his car to cut a hole in the fence - and longer since they had any water. When she looks up, their eyes meet. And she knows - she just knows, in that moment, that they're thinking the exact same thing. Feeling the exact same thing, at the same time.

It's happening again, they both think.

It's a sinking feeling. Dread, yes - but also weariness. They've been fighting this shit for almost two years. And now, just when they thought it was truly over -

But it doesn't matter. Because as they look at each other in the dim light coming in through the broken-in windows of the derelict house, they rally. Yes, they're tired. Yes, it's all starting again. Yes, someone is trying to open the Gate again, to bring the Upside Down back into their lives. Yes, they will fight.

She doesn't need to say any of it. She can tell he knows what she's thinking. Instead, she looks back towards the conspicuous stairwell in the middle of the kitchen. "So, they packed up shop and left the lab."

"Seems like."

"After going to all the trouble of digging the tunnels to get in."

"So the question is, if they're not using the lab anymore..."

They both look towards the front door as a bolt of lightning turns everything bright and flat for a fraction of a second. Then Joyce finishes out the thought.

"Where did they go?"

The Shred

Rats and mice can only take one so far.

They've been useful for reconnaissance, but they are flawed. Namely, they have no connection to Home. Their bodies are too warm, too tethered to this soft dimension. Their matter just doesn't accept the Shadow. In order for them to be useful, they must be changed. And that takes time. And energy. Neither of which the Shred has.

What the Shred *really* needs is a host that already has a connection to Home - a host that's already suitable to its needs. The Shadow found one such host last cycle. So the Shred tried William Byers again - but he, like a petulant child, refused. He fought back. He's not worth the effort of subduing right at this moment - and besides, the Shred is running out of energy. The newly-formed fissure between realities is tenuous.

It will have to find a different human host, and resign itself to taking the time and energy to adequately change the host to fit its needs. The boy would have been ideal, but he's being troublesome right now. He'll have to be dealt with later.

In the meantime, the Shred is on the move.

The Shadow has been watching Hawkins. And the Shred knows what the Shadow knows. The fissure is too slight for them to reform into one, for now, but it's enough to relay information. Instructions.

The Shadow has been watching. All humans tend to blur together, but there is one in particular that could be useful.

The Shred needs a human host that other humans like. A human that

is physically strong. Someone the inhabitants of Hawkins already respect to some degree.

One such human, as it happens, is currently soaring down the road in his automobile, his heat signature alight in the comforting dark of night.

The Shred gathers itself, plans a trajectory, and dives straight through the glass windshield of Billy Hargrove's Camaro.